

NOVEL
6

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Mushoku Tensei

jobless reincarnation

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Eris was
looking
straight
at me.

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Seven Seas Entertainment

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*“The easiest moment to fall into despair is the
moment in which you see a glimmer of hope.”*

—Not every person gets to live their life freely.

AUTHOR: RUDEUS GREYRAT
TRANSLATION: JEAN RF MAGOTT

Chapter 1: Route Selection

I was now twelve.

I only realized this when I looked down at my Adventurer card and, all of a sudden, saw the number twelve in the age column. When had my birthday gone by without me noticing? Being on a voyage like this skewed my sense of time.

Still, two years since we were teleported, huh? It had only taken two years to travel across both the Demon Continent and the Millis Continent. Or, if you looked at it the other way, two *whole* years had already passed.

At any rate, the Asura Kingdom was almost before us. After what had transpired on the Millis Continent, it seemed unlikely we'd experience much hardship from here on out. We had money and the means to travel. The only thing I had to worry about was not knowing the whereabouts of the rest of my family: Zenith, Lilia, Aisha, and also Sylphie. Despite Paul's efforts, they still hadn't been found.

I believed they were all still alive, but no matter how eager I was to search for them, they wouldn't be easy to find. All I could do was take my time and do a thorough job.

We were currently at the eastern edge of the King Dragon Realm in the harbor city of East Port. Just like in West Port, the city had a sizeable presence of fisheries and smugglers.

We booked an inn and began our strategy meeting. As usual, the three of us gathered around a map, our faces pressed in close.

"All right, let's talk about what we're going to do from here on out."

The other two peered at the map with serious expressions on their faces. We'd done this enough that I expected them to be sick of it, but even Eris—someone with no patience for complex conversations—was listening in with a solemn look on her face.

"There are three routes from here to the Asura Kingdom," I explained, pointing at the map I'd just purchased. It was a simple map with rough outlines of forests and village locations. The manufacture and sale of detailed maps was strictly prohibited in this country, so as to prevent other countries from possibly getting hold of those maps. Well, it didn't matter as long as we knew the basic lay of the land.

"The first is a highway primarily used as a trade route." I used my finger to trace the path, which detoured east around the King Dragon Mountains. "This is the safest route. Based on our travelling speed, we'd arrive in ten months' time."

"Why do we have to go around like that?" Eris asked, understandably doubtful.

I pointed to the western flank of the mountains. "Because if we detour to the west, we'll run into a large forest. That's the second possible route."

A vast, dense forest spread across the land west of the King Dragon Mountains, making it impossible to travel by carriage. If you were familiar with the path, you could take months off the journey by taking this route, but that would require riding on horseback. Eris and I couldn't do that.

Ruijerd could probably ride a horse, but no matter how small I was, there was no way three of us could fit on one horse. If we were going to take that route, we'd have to take it on foot.

I had no way of figuring out how many days that would take, but I knew that basically everyone chose the safe eastern route over the alternatives. Either taking the other routes didn't actually save much time, or the eastern path itself was actually faster. Slow and steady wins the race, as they say. That was how I summarized my explanation, at least.

"Okay, then scratch the western path," Eris agreed.

"As for the third possible route..." It would involve taking a ship to the Begaritt Continent, and then trekking overland to the Asura Kingdom. I had no idea how long this path would take. "I'm crossing it off our list of options."

"How come?!"

"Because it's dangerous," I said. Mana was even thicker on the Begaritt Continent than it was on the Demon Continent. The average strength of the beasts there was on par with those of the Demon Continent, but there were numerous underground labyrinths that created bizarre weather patterns on the surface.

The climate there could easily be described in one word: desert. The entire continent was one enormous desert. There were gigantic scorpions the size of a Great Tortoise, and masses of enormous worms that preyed primarily on said scorpions. The days were scorching hot and the nights were Arctic cold. There were almost no oases, so there was nowhere to stop and rest. As one approached the Asura Kingdom, the sand gave way to a snow-covered terrain with freezing temperatures, and there would be fewer and fewer monsters to hunt for food.

"Thus, we're going to take the eastern route."

"As usual, you're a coward," Eris complained.

"I'm just faint of heart."

"I think I could do it just fine." It seemed Eris wanted to see the Begaritt Continent. Her eyes were alight. However, the distance between the Central Continent and the Millis Continent was nothing compared to the distance between here and the Begaritt Continent. "We'd be on a ship for a long time if we chose that route. Are you *sure* you'd be okay with that, Eris?"

"...We're not going to Begaritt."

And that was how we decided we were taking the eastern route.

Before I realized what was happening, I was in a pure white room. Emotion welled from the depths of my body. It was such a familiar sensation that I could easily describe it.

So damn disgusting.

"Already resorting to foul language? Just as crass as ever, I see."

Standing before me was an indistinct, person-shaped mosaic: the Man-God.

Tch, acting like you know me. Can't believe you're showing up again, just when I'd finally started to forget about you.

"Yes, it's been a whole year."

Yes, a whole year. Such a long time. Tell me, do you only show up once a year? If so, that would put my heart at

ease.

“No, that’s not the case at all.”

I figured as much. After the first time you appeared, you showed yourself again just a week later.

“That aside, you’re as cold to me as ever. It’s all thanks to me that you got that demon eye, you know.”

Yeah, well, I’m grateful for that...but if you’d told me more, I wouldn’t have ended up in that cell, and I wouldn’t have missed important information that led to my fight with Paul. Ah, dammit, I bet you found the whole thing really entertaining: Paul and I butting heads because I didn’t know my family was missing, me being all depressed afterward and Eris cheering me up...even managing to make up with Paul in the end.

“Well, yes, that was entertaining. But are you sure about that?”

Sure about what?

“Sure that it’s all my fault?”

Tch... Dammit. Being in this room takes me back to the past. Back to when I used to blame everything on other people. I’ve reflected on my mistakes. Reflected... Argh, dammit, I can’t remember what kind of reflection I did. Why can’t I... Dammit, dammit!

“Well, that’s part of your charm. But a little reflection won’t be enough for you to move forward.”

Whatever. It’s just that I can’t remember right now. But I will when I wake up. I can recognize my mistakes. So, let’s restart our conversation. I’ve decided to listen to you.

“Listen? Hmm, now this *is* different. You’re honestly going to listen to what I have to say?”

Yeah, that's right. But there's one thing I want you to tell me.

"What's that? I don't mind answering if it's something I have knowledge about."

Tell me where my family is.

"I thought your family was in another world?"

Don't play games with me. Zenith, Lilia and Aisha. If possible, Sylphie, Ghislaine, Philip, and Sauros, too.

"Hmm."

What? I'm asking sincerely.

"I don't know if I should tell you..."

You're just a voyeur who spies on people's lives! Are you only going to tell me things that are convenient for you? You can arrange for me to meet up with the World's Greatest Demon Emperor, but you can't tell me where my family is?

"Okay, okay, I'm sorry. I got a little carried away."

Good, as long as you know what you did.

"But are you sure? I might lie to you this time."

What! Lie?! So, you finally admit it! That's right, you are the type to lie, aren't you?

"I'm asking whether you can trust what I say."

No, I can't trust you. This is an emergency, so I'll do as you say, but if it turns out you're lying to me, I'll never listen to your advice again. Got it?

"Then I want you to promise me something."

Promise you what?

"If my advice allows you to reunite with your family, then I want you to trust me from now on."

Are you telling me to be your little puppet? Be your yes-man and obey your every command?

“No, no, I’m not asking you to go that far. But it’s going to get exhausting if you’re this hostile every time we talk, you know?”

It’ll be exhausting even if I’m not. Do you even know what it’s like? To be haunted by a past you want to forget? To feel like the memories of your repentance and growth have been erased? To be overwhelmed by self-loathing the moment you wake up in the morning?

“I see. I’ve wronged you. All right, then why don’t we decide on some rules? Like me telling you ahead of time when I’ll next drop in to give you advice?”

Yes, that’s a wonderful idea! How about coming to see me again in a hundred years?

“But you’ll be dead by then, no?”

I’m telling you to never show your face again.

“Sigh... Well, I figured you’d say that. Are you sure you don’t want any advice from me this time?”

...No. Hold on a sec. I’m sorry. I’ll compromise. If you can give me advice this time that will reunite me with a member of my family, then I’ll stop being so hostile when we talk.

“And you’ll trust me?”

Nope, I’m not willing to go that far. But I’ll at least stop having these meaningless exchanges about whether or not I’m going to listen.

“Well, that’s optimistic.”

So, you compromise, too. Stop showing up out of nowhere like you did this time. Give me some prior warning.

Or show up in someone else's dreams and use them to pass on a message to me.

"That would be difficult. There's actually a condition that must be met for me to be able to appear in someone's dreams."

A condition? So that means you can't just show your face whenever you want?

"Exactly. In addition to that, I can only show up in the dreams of someone who is on the same wavelength as I am. There aren't many who can receive my advice with such fortuitous timing. You're quite lucky."

I could weep for joy. Anyway, there's a condition, huh? What is it?

"Who knows? I'm not even sure myself. All I know is that there'll be a sudden 'aha!' moment where I'm like, 'This guy's the one, today is the time.' And that's when I'm able to link up."

Yeah? So that means you can't completely control it, either. Forget the prior warning, then. Let's see...I'd like you to be more detailed in your advice. If all you say is "go here" or "go there," it just leaves me confused as to what I'm supposed to do. It makes me feel like you're playing me.

"All right, more details. Got it."

Okay. Go ahead, then.

"Ahem. Well, this is my advice this time."

A vision suddenly appeared in my demon eye.

A back alley in some country somewhere. There's a lone girl, and someone violently grabs her hand. The person who seized her is a soldier. There're two soldiers. The other

one is tearing a piece of paper he'd snatched from her into pieces. The girl watches him, screaming something.

The vision suddenly ended there.

“Rudeus. Listen to me closely. Her name is Aisha Greyrat. She is currently being detained in the Shirone Kingdom. You'll be there when the events from your vision transpire, and you'll meet her and save her. You absolutely must not let your name be known. Call yourself the Kennel Master of Dead End and ask her for the details of her situation. Then send a letter to your acquaintance in the Shirone Royal Palace. If you do that, both Lilia and Aisha will be rescued from that place.”

Huh? Wait, what? No—wait, why? Acquaintance? A letter?

“Was that a little too much detail? If I tell you too much, it'll spoil my fun, so that'll have to do. Now then, I wonder which one you'll get along with...”

What? Lilia and Aisha are both in the Shirone Kingdom? Why? If that's where they were, they should have been found by now. And what do you mean, which one am I going to get along with? Does that mean I'm going to clash with the other?

“Good luck, Rudeus.”

Luck...luck...luck...

As the word echoed in my mind, my consciousness faded.

I woke with a start.

“Ugh!”

My head was pounding. The dizziness was overwhelming, and I felt nauseated. I climbed out of bed and half-ran straight to the bathroom, where I started vomiting into the toilet bowl.

I had a dreadful headache, and my feet were unsteady. When I left the bathroom, the trip back to my room felt much longer than it had when I raced in here. I pressed my hand against the wall and slowly slumped to the floor. In the darkness of the inn, I could hear someone panting. Startled, I looked around to find the source, only to realize that it was the sound of my own breathing.

“What’s wrong? Are you okay?”

A white face floated in the pitch black of the hallway. It was Ruijerd. He was peering at me with a worried look on his face.

“Yeah...I’m fine.”

“What did you eat? Can you use detoxification magic?” He pulled a cloth from his pocket and wiped the area around my mouth.

At the whiff of my own vomit, the nausea flared up again. But I managed to keep from barfing again, even as the queasiness lingered in my chest. “I’m okay.” I somehow managed to wring the words out from the depths of my throat.

“Are you sure?” He still sounded worried.

I nodded. I was familiar with this headache. I’d felt it before when we were in Wind Port. “Yeah, I was half-asleep and failed to moderate my Eye of Foresight. That’s why this happened.”

When I’d previously used the Eye of Foresight to look several seconds into the future, it had given me a headache

just like this one. I had a good idea of why this had happened. The dream, that advice, and the vision he made me see—the Man-God showed me the future. Most likely using the Eye of Foresight.

“So that’s why...” I mumbled to myself. Ruijerd gave me a puzzled look.

I remembered how I’d met the Great Demon Emperor in the port city and obtained my demon eye. I remembered how sudden it was and how, for some reason, I’d picked this specific eye. I’d met Gallus right after that, but the eye contributed nothing to our journey across the sea.

It was true that I’d eventually defeated Gallus using the eye, but I felt like I could have managed that on my own if I’d had to. To me, there was no greater meaning behind my acquisition of the demon eye, but perhaps there was to the Man-God. Perhaps the whole reason he’d arranged for me to meet the Great Demon Emperor was so he could use the eye to show me the future. It sure did feel like he was making careful preparations for something.

My anxiety reared its ugly head, and for the first time, I feared the Man-God. I got the impression that this being, this creature with undefined form and incredible power, was trying to use me for something. It sent a chill through me.

“Rudeus, you look pale. Are you sure you’re okay?” Ruijerd asked again, looking concerned.

I almost blurted out my anxieties. *The truth is that ever since I met you, the Man-God has been monitoring me. I’ve been following his advice and doing what he tells me.*

But in that moment, I realized something. *Ever since I met you.* That was it. The first time we came into contact was right before I met Ruijerd. Back then, the god had also advised me to help Ruijerd out.

Now, that was strange. Why didn't he contact me before that? Why did he only contact me right after the Displacement Incident? Why advise me to help Ruijerd rather than just rely on him?

I felt like all of these things were connected. I had no proof of this, but despite that, a thought occurred to me. *Maybe the Man-God plans to make Ruijerd do something.*

The Man-God said he could only appear in my dreams if a certain condition were met. Perhaps he was bound by that condition so he couldn't manipulate Ruijerd directly. So he triggered the Displacement Incident to transport me—someone who *did* fit that criteria—to the Demon Continent, and guided me to Ruijerd, thereby getting him to accompany us to the Central Continent.

But if that were the case, why help me acquire the demon eye or give me advice on how to save Aisha? I didn't know. I didn't know what he was thinking. Nor was I sure if I should say anything to Ruijerd.

“...”

I wanted to confide in someone, but I didn't think it was right to put more on Ruijerd's shoulders. Maybe telling him would even fulfill the Man-God's unknown conditions, and the god would be able to talk directly to Ruijerd. Honestly, Ruijerd would probably be easily taken in by whatever the Man-God said to him. I wasn't even entirely convinced he was telling me the truth, but at least my hostility made it difficult for him to deceive me. I wanted to believe that as long as I kept that up, nothing too terrible would happen.

“Mister Ruijerd, if you ever find yourself in a difficult situation and someone whispers honeyed words in your ear, don't ever believe what they say. Deceitful people strategically target you when you're the most vulnerable.”

In the end, I didn't tell him about the Man-God.

"I have no idea what you're talking about, but I understand."

I had mixed feelings, watching him look at me so earnestly and nod. Ruijerd trusted me, and yet I was hiding things from him. It was largely because I'd determined keeping them secret was the best course of action, but that didn't alleviate the guilt.

My headache and nausea had faded without my noticing. Now my thoughts weighed heavily for a different reason. I returned to my room, but even after I crawled back into bed, I didn't feel like sleeping. My eyes were wide open, and ideas churned in my head. When I closed my eyes, they floated in front of me, one after the other.

"Whah ish it..."

I heard someone talking in their sleep. Eris was sprawled in the bed beside me, snoring away. Her sleeping posture was as poor as ever, legs spread wide open. Rather than pajamas, she wore a pair of shorts, her toned legs poking out, and a dangerous gap at the hem where you could peek further inside. Her shirt was riding up, exposing her adorable belly button. Even if you looked straight down at her, you could see the curves of her chest. She didn't wear a bra to bed, so if I squinted hard enough, I could see the small peaks of the tips of her breasts. I could also see the drool dribbling down her chin as she grinned in her sleep.

"Mmph."

I smiled wryly at her sleep-talk and rose out of bed. I pulled her shirt back down and readjusted the blanket over her.

"Rudeus...is a perv..."

She had a dirty look on her face. Here I was, making myself sick with worry, and she still called me a perv.

I was tempted to touch her breasts so my actions would at least warrant that accusation, but a wave of drowsiness came over me. I yawned and collapsed back into my bed.

Eris was impressive as ever. No sooner had I thought that than I was asleep.

Chapter 2: Rice

The next day dawned.

As we grabbed breakfast at a pub, I announced, “We’re going to stop by the Shirone Kingdom.”

Ruijerd and Eris both tilted their heads but still nodded. “Okay. Fine.” “Understood.”

Neither one of them asked why or for what purpose. I actually appreciated that. I had already decided that I would avoid talking about the Man-God as much as possible, but still fretted over how to explain my actions without bringing him up.

Ruijerd probably had his own theories after seeing me last night. He’d probably already realized that I was hiding something—though it was entirely possible he just thought I was hiding some kind of illness. Not entirely incorrect, given that the Man-God was like a plague bearer.

“Shirone—you mean that place where your master’s at, right?”

As Eris said it, the image of a certain young girl came to mind: Roxy Migurdia. That was right. She was supposed to be in Shirone. The Man-God had said to send a letter to my acquaintance. He must have meant for me to plead with Roxy for her assistance.

“That’s right. Someone I really respect. My...teacher.” I’d almost said the word “master,” but caught myself in time. *Come to think of it, Roxy forbade me from calling her my master.* Though “master” was exactly the term I’d used when telling everyone how wonderful she was lately... Oh, well.

"We should stop by and meet them. They might be able to help us somehow." Eris nodded to herself in satisfaction.

Someone as incredible as Roxy would surely be of great help to us. I was certain of it. She was also, however, a magician at the royal palace, and had to be busy. I didn't want to trouble her too much—she'd already done so much for me.

Regardless of the Displacement Incident or the search for my family, I still wanted to see her. I also wanted to thank her for her *Dictionary of Demonkind*. If she hadn't given me that book, I might still be on the Demon Continent right now. I regretted losing it in the incident—it deserved to be copied and sold worldwide.

"I want to see your teacher," Eris said.

"Hm. I'm interested in meeting them, too."

Both Eris and Ruijerd seemed intrigued, probably because I invoked Roxy's name with praise every now and then. I was so proud to call her my teacher, and so I mentioned her everywhere I went. That was a given.

"All right, then. When we get to Shirone Kingdom, I'll introduce you."

As I made that promise, the three of us set off.

First, we proceeded along the highway which took us straight through Wyvern, the capital of the King Dragon Realm. From there, the route veered around the King Dragon Mountains and split off. One path stretched straight up north, and another led out west. We selected the northern route that led to Shirone.

We wound up unexpectedly spending seven whole days in the capital city of Wyvern. Our initial plan was to leave after three days, but there was an issue with our carriage and the repairs took some time. I could've done the adjustments myself had the carriage been made from stone or steel, but there was nothing magic could do to fix something made of wood.

We paid extra to rush the repairs. It still took seven days for them to be completed, but there was no reason to be hasty. In the vision that the Man-God showed me, Aisha was surrounded by two men. I was worried, but the god had said I would be there when it happened. In that case, perhaps our carriage troubles were the work of fate. If fate was involved, then no matter how quickly I rushed to Shirone, I wouldn't meet her before it was time.

I had to stay as calm as possible. With that in mind, I made my way around Wyvern.

The King Dragon Realm was the third biggest country in this world, and the largest in the southern part of the Central Continent, with four vassal states under it. Once, this country had been just one of many in the south. That changed after it attacked the King Dragon Mountains in the northwest and slew their ruler, Kajakt the Monarch of the King Dragons. This gave his conquerors access to a huge vein of minerals, instantaneously boosting their country's resources and power. It was also the origin of forty-eight magical swords that were now scattered about the world, as well as one of the places mentioned in a line of the Epic of the North God.

Despite this storied past, the country didn't seem like it put too much emphasis on tradition. Instead it felt like America—like a mix of different elements. There were many smithies and sword training halls, and the styles were diverse, but most of the techniques I saw belonged to the

North God Style or Water God Style. I tried peeking into one of the training halls, but most of the people being taught were children. Even the masters of those halls were mostly only Advanced-tier swordfighters, so Eris took one look at them and said, with a snort of laughter, "They're nothing special." Even Ruijerd expressed disapproval.

At any rate, I decided to gather information on missing persons. I found one of Paul's underlings in the Adventurers' Guild who told me there was no information to be found in this country. It wasn't going to be easy to find anyone who was still missing after all this time.

Following that, I did my usual market research. Specialty goods from both the Millis Continent and the Central Continent were sold here. It was among the wide variety of food being sold in the marketplace that I made a discovery: rice. Its color was a bit yellow, but it was definitely rice.

Of course, I already knew there was rice in this country. I'd eaten white rice when I was in East Port. I had really been looking forward to eating this country's cuisine, but unfortunately the only things their pubs served were easy-made soups, paella, and rice porridge. A bit different from what I was looking for. I wanted to eat pure white rice.

The moment I saw the rice for sale, an electric shock ran through me. If I couldn't buy cooked white rice, then I just needed to make it myself. I bought the rice instantly.

A few hours later, I was in the inn's garden, preparing my food. I had 4.5 grams of rice, cooking utensils I'd carefully prepared with earth magic, an outdoor stove, a recipe that a pub owner taught me, eggs, and salt. I held the recipe in one hand while I washed the rice and started

the fire in the stove. The heat of the fire was key to cooking rice properly.

“What are you doing?”

I had my game face on as Eris came over. “An experiment,” I said.

“Hmm?” She huffed in disinterest and started swinging her arms. Judging by the way she kept stealing glances at me, she was actually more curious than she let on.

I turned over the hourglass I’d borrowed from the pub owner and powered up the fire. The pub owner said that the trick to cooking rice was slowly turning up the heat, so I was following his advice. After turning over the hourglass three times, I lowered the heat. Then I turned it over two more times. Finally, I extinguished the flames and turned it over another two times.

“It’s done,” I said.

“Really?” Eris stopped swinging her arms and stooped beside me. Her scent wafted toward me, but my hunger was currently stronger than my sex drive.

She looked at the pot in anticipation. I was also filled with excitement as I lifted the lid. The wave of heat carried the smell of freshly cooked rice right to my nose.

“It smells really good. Good job, Rudeus.”

“No, I need to taste it first,” I said, pinching a bit of rice between my fingers and popping it into my mouth. “Hmm... I’d give it a forty-five out of one hundred.”

It was nowhere near as good as the two types of Japanese rice that stood out in my memory: Koshihikari and Sasanishiki. Even if I compared it to all the modern types of Japanese rice, it wouldn’t even be C-ranked. It was dry, had a kind of bitterness to it, and was still faintly yellow in color. My poor cooking methods were partly to blame, but the

ingredients themselves were inferior too, perhaps because rice wasn't a staple in this country. You couldn't even call this white rice.

In truth I should have given it only thirty points, which would have been a failing grade. But tasting rice at all evoked such nostalgia that I couldn't. With a bit of seasoning, it could earn fifteen more points. *Ah, I really am too kind*, I mused inwardly.

"We ate this before, right? What kind of experiment was this?"

"This is just the beginning."

I heaped the rice into an earthen bowl I'd made. Then I took a scrambled raw egg, which I'd cast detoxification magic on just in case, and created a hole in the middle of the rice before pouring in the mixture. I sprinkled salt all over the top, took the chopsticks I'd also made with my magic, and put both hands together.

"Here we go."

"Huh? But, Rudeus, that egg is...raw...!"

I opened my mouth wide and took a huge bite of the now brightly yellow-colored rice. Hmm...it smelled questionable. The salt I'd added to it didn't seem to do anything.

Now that I was trying it, I noticed the flavor of the egg was different, too. It was a far cry from the fresh ones sold in Japan for raw consumption. I should probably cast detoxification again on myself afterward just to be safe. Also, it definitely needed soy sauce, without which the raw taste was all too apparent.

I wondered if soy sauce existed in this world as well. If it didn't, then maybe I could find some kind of substitute?

"Does it taste good?"

Since Eris had asked, I used my earth magic to make another bowl. I spooned in some rice, added some salt and offered it to her. I also passed her a spoon I'd made—this would be beginner-friendly, no chopsticks.

"Hey...is this really all there is to it?"

Gulp!

I nodded quietly. Though I wasn't proud of it, there had been a point in my former life when I subsisted solely on rice for meals and rice balls for snacks.

"Hmm..." Eris chewed slowly, mixed emotions on her face. Her tastes were still that of a child. Once I broke an egg over it, she did say, "This is better than before," and filled her cheeks with rice as she ate it all.

Raw egg mixed with rice really was the best meal ever—and perfectly balanced, too. As we said that, we finished our food, gobbling down the last of the crunchy, burnt rice on the bottom.

Ruijerd was the only one who didn't get to share the meal, but he made no complaints. *He's the real adult*, I thought. Still, I did feel a little guilty. Next time, I'd make sure he got a share.



We departed from the King Dragon Realm and took the highway up north. There were two more countries between us and the Shirone Kingdom: the Sanakia Kingdom and the Kikka Kingdom. They were both vassal states to the King Dragon Realm.

Rice cultivation was booming in the Sanakia Kingdom. Its climate must have been perfect for it, because the highway was lined with rice paddies. There were lots of rivers in the area, so the topography was probably similar to Japan and East Asia. The rice was the same as the kind I ate in the King Dragon Realm, meaning it was probably exported from here. I decided to call it Sanakia rice.

At the inns we stopped at, our meals consisted mainly of seafood and rice. I'd learned to eat in moderation since coming to this world, but the appeal of rice was just too irresistible, and I ate until my stomach was full to bursting.

Eris kept looking over at me, wide-eyed, during mealtimes. Perhaps it piqued her interest that I, normally so fussy about food, had lately been shoveling it in.

"What's wrong?" I asked finally.

"I thought you were the type that didn't really eat much, Rudeus."

I'd never been a light eater in my previous life, where I always came back for another helping as long as there was still food on the table. The only reason I'd been practicing moderation since being reborn was because this world's food didn't suit my palate. Leaving aside the tough meat that was a staple of most of our meals on the Demon Continent, even the bread-heavy meals of the Asura Kingdom felt a bit lacking to me. Zenith's cooking wasn't bad, but I couldn't help my longing for rice.

Ahh, yes. Rice is so wonderful, I thought.

Food wasn't the only thing I spent my time on. I popped in at the Adventurers' Guild, too. Unsurprisingly, given that this was the Central Continent, invoking the name "Dead End" didn't elicit the least bit of shock. Just because someone was famous in America, for example, didn't mean their popularity extended to Japan. Or how there were a lot of children who knew about Superman, but didn't know who Captain America was.

They were adventurers, so they'd probably heard the name Dead End before. But no one kicked up much of a fuss. Even if they knew what the Superd were, the Superd's most recognizable trait was their hair color. Just like a track team girl wasn't really a track team girl to a modern-day Japanese otaku unless she had a black ponytail, Ruijerd wasn't really a Superd without the green hair.

That said, A-ranked adventurers seemed to be more observant than the rest.

"Hey, you guys. Never seen you before. You're A-ranked, right? Did you just form a group recently?" The man who approached us had an aura similar to Nokopara's. Considering how that had gone, I wasn't too keen on getting friendly with him.

"We started two years ago," I replied.

"Ooh, that's not something you hear around here. Dead End, huh? That's the name of some fiend from the Demon Continent, right?"

"Yes. And we've traveled all the way from the Demon Continent to get here."

"Heh heh, saw that one coming. And let me guess, that guy over there is the fiend?"

"Yes," I said, "but could you please refrain from calling him that?"

"Why? That's what you're trying to pass yourselves off as, right?" He laughed as if we were pulling his leg, but I kept a serious expression on my face. Eris looked slightly perturbed, and Ruijerd looked uncomfortable.

The man broke into a cold sweat when he saw our reactions. "Wait, are you for real?"

"If you don't believe me, would you like him to show you the gem on his forehead?"

"No. No, that's fine! I just didn't think he was the real thing. I guess the Superd really do exist, then..."

The fact that we'd reached the A-rank on the Demon Continent lent more credibility to our claims of Ruijerd being a Superd. Despite the harsh treatment demons faced on the Central Continent, people didn't seem as terrified of the Superd here, perhaps because the threat of them was so foreign. After all, people who claimed brown bears were harmless were generally people who had never encountered one in the mountains before.

The name Dead End had lost most of its value, but it would be easier to restore Ruijerd's reputation when people weren't terrified of him. That said, I still hadn't come up with a good plan for that. The Ruijerd figure I'd made wouldn't be any good as long as we were in the domain of the Millis faith, either.

As I was preoccupied with those thoughts, Eris glared at the man who had spoken to us. "Eris, please don't start a fight," I said.

"Yeah, I know that already."

"Okay, good."

Lately, she'd stopped scrapping with the other adventurers. Her demeanor had grown tougher this past year. She no longer had the look of a novice about her. Just one glance was enough to tell a person she was dangerous, so why would they bother approaching?

For her own part, Eris had also come to understand the adventurers' style of humor. Even if someone said something offensive to her, she was now calm enough to realize that she'd heard it before. She'd answer their quip with an appropriate response, the other person would laugh, and then she'd grin back at them. She really had become just like an adventurer.

That said, she was always still game if someone wanted to pick a fight with her. Some people, most of them C-ranked and young themselves, would deliberately approach her after seeing that she was A-ranked despite her youth. They'd come up and say something like, "I bet you don't have any skills yourself. You just had those guys in your party carry you the whole way, right?"

This invariably resulted in a one-punch knockout. Somehow, morons like this seemed to be in just about every Adventurers' Guild we went to.

As for me, I would just off-handedly respond, "That's right! The master of our party is so incredible, we're living the high life!" I had no pride. Besides, it was true that we'd relied on Ruijerd a lot to advance to such a high rank. Eris didn't seem to like my attitude, but there was no way we could have gotten this far by ourselves. *Let's at least show some modesty, I thought.*

The cultivation of a flower that resembled field mustard was widespread in the Kikka Kingdom. From the highway, we saw endless fields of white flowers in bloom. Definitely a flourishing industry, but also one the kingdom had been compelled to invest in by the King Dragon Realm. The

abundant rice paddies in the Sanakia Kingdom had also been planted on the Realm's command. Being a vassal state was rough.

Rice was a staple in this country's cuisine, too. Upon testing it, I realized that the further north you went, the better the quality of the rice. Perhaps the day when I would experience love at first bite with rice this world wasn't far. Unfortunately, the northern part of the Central Continent was currently split into a bunch of tiny countries engaged in continuous minor conflicts. There was no way they could cultivate delicious rice under those circumstances. Truly a pity.

There was a dish called Nanahoshiyaki that was popular all the way from the King Dragon Realm to the Kikka Kingdom. It was meat covered in rice flour and wheat flour, and fried in oil at a high temperature. In other words, *karaage*—Japanese fried chicken. Apparently, the dish was developed in the Asura Kingdom and gained huge popularity there before making it all the way here. It required an abundance of cooking oil to make, but since a neighboring country produced vast amounts of the dish, there were plenty of opportunities to eat it in this region.

Unfortunately, this “fried chicken” didn’t taste so good, either. The meat used was mostly sheep, pig, or horse. There was no set temperature for the frying, so sometimes the dish came out hard and other times it came out gooey. It also wasn’t properly seasoned, even though you could use salt, dried herbs, or the sauce that was unique to the area to change the flavor. The food we’d had in East Port suddenly didn’t seem so bad by comparison. Quite the opposite, in fact.

Being a bit of a gourmand, I understood that the cooks in this country were trying their best. Still, what they delivered wasn’t what I longed for. The lack of soy sauce

was impossible to overlook. If I only had soy sauce, garlic, and ginger for seasoning, then I could make something salty and sweet.

“Lately, you get this troubled look on your face whenever we eat, Rudeus.”

“He’s picky about flavor,” Ruijerd chimed in. “He’s probably got some opinions about it.”

“I think it’s pretty good,” Eris responded.

We sat around a table, the two of them gulping down their food. They weren’t picky at all. I hadn’t come all this way to be a food critic and pass judgment on every meal, but I couldn’t help but think how much better it would be with just a little bit of soy sauce.

“But the texture of the food is amazing. It’s crunchy, and then when you bite into it the juice just fills your mouth.”

“Yeah, it’s good,” Ruijerd agreed.

They both asked for seconds and cleaned their bowls in no time flat. How fortunate they were. They could find this kind of food delicious because it was the first time they’d ever had it. I, knowing there was better out there, couldn’t be content.

I couldn’t help my cravings for white rice and fried chicken with soy sauce, or for tofu and miso soup with seaweed in it. My insatiable quest for good food continued alongside my search for missing persons, which, of course, yielded absolutely no information.

That was how things went for four months. Then, finally, we reached the Shirone Kingdom.

Chapter 3: The Shirone Kingdom

The Shirone Kingdom was a small but old country with a two-hundred-year history. This was notable because all the human countries except for the Asura Kingdom and the Holy Country of Millis had been wiped out in the war four hundred years ago.

The southern part of the Central Continent had been ripe with conflict until the King Dragon Realm took control of the whole region some three hundred years ago. Even now, the land to the north of here was a sprawling region of discord. The Shirone Kingdom was close to the Conflict Zone. Given its precarious location, how had this kingdom endured for two hundred years? The answer lay in the alliance it formed with the King Dragon Realm right after it was founded—an alliance in name only. Much like the other two countries we'd had to cross through to get here, the Shirone Kingdom was basically a vassal state to the King Dragon Realm.

That said, I had very little interest in national politics. The only thing I cared about was the fact that Roxy was in this country. I wondered if my young—wait, no. She wasn't actually young, was she? Anyway, I wondered if my adorable, clumsy master was still a court magician here. She'd said the prince was giving her trouble, but I was sure she could handle that.

It'd been so long. I wanted to see her. I wanted to see her and tell her I was all right. I wanted to tell her about how I visited her hometown. I wanted her to show me the King-tier magic that she'd said she could use now. My heart

thrummed with anticipation as we made our way down the road toward the capital.

Along the side of the highway were disjointed rice fields and grazing livestock. There were also inactive plots of land and pastures full of plants that looked like clover. I wasn't too well-versed in agricultural practices, but the people of this world seemed to be putting some thought into how they grew their crops.

Although supposedly a vassal state of the King Dragon Realm, the Shirone Kingdom didn't really have the vibe of a colony, unlike the two countries we'd passed through before. Maybe it was because it was so far away, or because it was being used as a buffer between the Conflict Zone and other countries. At any rate, such was the landscape that accompanied us as we arrived at the capital, Latakia.

In this world, most major cities were surrounded by protective ramparts, including Roa and Millishion. Even the larger cities in the Kikka Kingdom and Sanakia Kingdom had walls around them. The same was true of the Shirone Kingdom's capital, which had a sturdy, awe-inspiring wall lining its perimeter.

In hindsight, it was the same way on the Demon Continent. In fact, because the continent had such a high concentration of powerful monsters, their defenses were more thorough. There wasn't a city out there that could match the huge natural walls that surrounded the city of Rikarisu. Each city on the continent utilized the special abilities of the tribes living nearby to erect strong walls to protect itself. Even small settlements conducted daily exterminations of beasts around the village's outskirts. In comparison, the ramparts on the Central Continent looked as if they were merely for show.

We passed through those walls and made our way into the city, where we parked our carriage at a stable. There were many labyrinths in the vicinity of the city, so there were plenty of tough-looking adventurers around, many of whom engaged primarily in dungeon diving. That had been Paul and Ghislaine's life in the past, and even Roxy had done it for a while. I was pretty sure it was Paul who'd said dungeon divers were incredibly skilled.

There were many labyrinths scattered throughout Shirone, and you could make a ridiculous amount of money just by exploring their topmost levels. There were probably a handful of S-ranked adventurers among the dungeon divers who were aiming for the most lucrative loot, and we mingled with that crowd as we traveled the main road and selected a random inn to stay at. As usual, it was one tailored to D-ranked adventurers. Even the low-ranked inns in this town were a bit pricey, perhaps because there were so many high-ranking adventurers around.

Compared to the D-ranked accommodations on the Demon Continent, the quality of the lodgings on the Central Continent wasn't bad at all. It was actually good enough that we would have been fine with rooms aimed at lower-ranked adventurers, but we had enough money not to worry about that. Quite the opposite. In fact, we could have afforded even better accommodations if we wanted.

I would like to stay in a better room, I thought to myself at one point, but even though we had the extra coin, it felt like a waste. Maybe I really was a penny pincher.

"All right! Now that we've arrived in the Shirone Kingdom, let's conduct our strategy meeting," I announced to the two standing in front of me. Their apathetic applause told me they'd gotten quite used to this setup. "Now, what should we start with?"

"We're going to meet your teacher, right?"

Eris' question reminded me of what the Man-God had said. "*Her name is Aisha Greyrat. Currently, she is being detained in the Shirone Kingdom. You'll be there when the events from your vision transpire, and you'll meet her and save her. You absolutely must not let your name be known. Call yourself the Kennel Master of Dead End and ask her for details on her situation. Then send a letter to your acquaintance in the Shirone Royal Palace. If you do that, both Lilia and Aisha will be saved from that palace.*" Something along those lines.

If I trusted his advice in its entirety, then I just had to walk down the alleyway I saw in the vision to trigger that event. I figured I should probably take Eris and Ruijerd along as well. After all, the Man-God said nothing about going alone this time.

I continued to think. If I believed the Man-God, then Lilia and Aisha were being detained at the Shirone Royal Palace. But in my vision, I'd met Aisha outside. That meant she'd somehow managed to escape the palace. I remembered the look of the two men who came after her in my dream. I'd seen their getup numerous times in the city; it was a normal soldier's attire.

In other words, Aisha would be pursued and then caught by palace soldiers. That was when I would come in. If I took the most obvious approach to save her, I'd risk making an enemy of the palace, which had to be why the Man-God had said not to use my name. It might be best if I hid my face, too.

While the knights were busy tracking my fake identity, I could send a letter to my acquaintance in the palace (Roxy) and ask her for help. If she was a court magician, then her words should hold some power. I already owed her so much. I didn't want to show up barefoot and dirty-soled at her

doorstep, like a stray child—though I would happily wash her feet if our positions were reversed.

This was the Man-God we were talking about, though. It was possible he was up to something. *If I tell you too much, it'll spoil my fun*, he'd said. In other words, he was hoping for something interesting to happen, and there was probably nothing I could do to avoid it.

However, he'd also said, *I hope you'll trust me next time*. Hopefully, even if there were unpleasant surprises lying in store for me, they wouldn't involve such things as serious injury or the death of someone close to me.

But this was all assuming I trusted the jerk. He might just be trying to deceive me this time, with no care for what happened after. Even so, there was no point in putting up needless resistance that might make everything catastrophically worse. I disliked feeling like I was playing into his hands again, but it seemed I had no choice but to listen.

My main goals were now to search for Aisha, to falsify my name, and to send a letter to Roxy. That said, how was I going to convince my companions? The letter wasn't a problem, but I still needed a good reason for searching the back alleys while using a fake name. Ever since we'd set out from Millishion, they'd made sure one of them was always by my side, even on our free days. Apparently, they were still concerned by how depressed I'd gotten after my encounter with Paul.

I felt bad about having worried them, but there was a high probability we'd end up facing off with some soldiers in our quest to find Aisha. Neither Eris nor Ruijerd was any good at acting. No matter who I took, it seemed likely they'd do something that would come back to bite us in the butt. Karma had a way of doing that.

Now then...what to do?

"Rudeus, what are you worrying about?"

Hm...well, it's like they say, better to act now and worry later, I reasoned with myself.

"Actually, I'd like for us to conceal our names while we're here."

"We're going to be pretending again? Why?"

"Umm..." Even if I had to keep mum about the Man-God, there was no reason I had to hide the rest of the story. "Actually, I heard from a source that members of my family have been taken captive somewhere in this country."

"Really?" asked Eris.

"Oh," grunted Ruijerd.

Neither asked from whom or where I got this information, even though one or the other of them had always been with me whenever I gathered information. But it was better for me if they didn't press the issue.

"Oh, I get it!" Eris exclaimed. "They'll be on alert if they hear the name Greyrat, then!"

"That's right."

"So, who's the family?"

"Lilia and Aisha. Our former maid and my little sister." Actually, now that I thought about it, what was I supposed to call Lilia anyway? She wasn't really my stepmother.

"Your little sister? You mean the one who was so full of herself, whom we met back in Millishion?"

"I have one more."

"Uh-huh..." Eris looked unenthused as she pursed her lips.

So Norn seemed full of herself? I didn't think that at all, but Eris clearly had a different impression. I wondered whose side I would take if Eris were to punch her...

Eris snorted triumphantly. "Well, if that's what's going on, no complaints here! Impressive, Rudeus. You really thought this through." So she said, but I was really only being strung along by the Man-God. "So we'll hide our names. Should we be using fake ones?"

"Yes, and it'd be best to go with something common," I reasoned.

"How come?"

"It's supposedly better if fake names aren't memorable."

"What were some of the famous names around these parts?" Eris wondered out loud.

"While we were traveling, I heard names like Shyna and Reidar a lot," Rudeus offered.

Shyna, Knight of the Death God, was a female knight who appeared frequently in the Epic of the North God. She was one of three North God knights, and used to be one of the God's companions. No matter how brutal the battle, she would always return home, almost as if she were unkillable. The story was probably fictitious, but there were still many who named their child Shyna in hopes that the name might keep them from being killed in some freak accident.

Reidar was the name of a Water God. He was a genius at countering attacks, could freeze the ocean and walk on top of it, and was the hero who vanquished the Sea King Dragon. The name of that legendary man was passed on through the generations. Each new head of the Water God Style would inherit it: men would be called Reidar while women would be called Reida. It was quite a common name around here.

The two were putting a lot of thought into the fake names they would use. I was grateful for that. Now I needed to give mine some serious thought, too.

“Rudeus, what are you going to do?”

“Well, let’s see. In this case, it might be better they know right off the bat that it’s a fake name.”

“How come?”

“They don’t know our names or our faces. It might confuse them if we give them a fake, flashy name to go off of,” I said, quoting a line from some super old anime I’d seen a long time ago. To be totally honest, it didn’t really matter as long as the names were fake.

“Then we should pick a cool name.”

A cool name, huh? “All right then. I’ll call myself the Knight of the Shadow Moon.”

“Knight of the Shadow Moon?!” Eris’ cheeks flushed and her eyes sparkled.

That was a character from *Kamen Rider* who loved haikus and wore what looked like a tacky lunch lady uniform. If someone like that appeared in front of Eris, she’d probably clobber them.

“I’ll do the same one! Wait, but we can’t be the same, um...”

Did she really like it that much? In that case, might as well stick with the knight theme. “Okay then. Eris, you can be the Sword of the Shadow Moon and Ruijerd can be the Lance of the Shadow Moon. Then we all match.”

“Very nice, we match! Let’s use those!”

I thought Ruijerd might be embarrassed by such a name, but he didn’t look too bothered. Paul had said that

Aqua Heartia was a cool name. Apparently, the concept of “nerds” didn’t exist in this world.

“But you don’t seem like a knight at all, Rudeus,” Eris muttered, after I thought we’d settled it.

Not a knight, huh? Maybe I should name myself Evil Magician or General Omega instead? Then again, I had no idea if I’d even end up using the name. If it didn’t work, I could always use Kennel Master instead.

“Okay. We’ve decided on our fake names, then.”

“What do we do next?”

“For now, I’ll send a letter to Roxy at the royal palace. We’ll spend our time gathering information until I get a reply,” I declared.

I went to the market the next day, purchased some stationery and an envelope, and started penning my letter to Roxy. I started off with seasonal greetings, asked after her well-being, and then informed her that, although I’d been teleported, I was safe. I told her that I was now in Shirone’s capital and wanted to meet her. Hoping to rouse her concern and anxiety, I casually mentioned how everyone from Buena Village was missing, and how none of them had been found despite the ongoing search. Then I broached the topic of our maid, Lilia, and closed by emphasizing one final time (because this was important) how worried I was about my family. I also structured the letter so that the first letter of each line, if read vertically, would read “HELP ME.” With all that I had included in my letter, I was sure Roxy would understand what I was implying.

I sealed it with wax that I pressed an imprint of Roxy's pendant into. I briefly considered sending it under a fake name, but I'd be in trouble if she threw it away thinking, "Who the hell is that?" So I signed it, *Your Beloved Pupil Rudeus Greyrat, Who Just Wants to Watch Over You.*

Honestly, Roxy would probably recognize my handwriting even if I did use a fake name, but it was also just like her to get careless when it came to something important. I wouldn't know if the letter would make it to her until she actually had it in her hands. Schrödinger's Roxy. I pictured Roxy sitting in a box that said "please pick me up." Aww. For God's (Roxy's) sake—you're supposed to flip the box over and hide inside of it.

Anyway. That aside, there was no harm in making sure she would read the contents by leaving my real name on the envelope.

"All right, I'm going to go send this letter off."

"Okay."

"All right, be careful!"

The two of them waved at me, Eris with a radiant smile on her face. What a letdown. I'd been so sure one of them would want to follow me.

"Eh? What are the two of you going to do?"

"I plan to ask around town about your sister," Eris said.

That was right—I had said we would be searching for information. Information was power, after all, and it never hurt to try to gather what we could. I actually felt a little abashed at how lax I'd become, trying to move on to the next step without doing that first.

"All right, then. I'll make sure to hunt down some information too, once I'm done sending this letter off." With that, I left the two of them behind.

I went to the Adventurers' Guild to post the letter. I intended to start searching for information afterward, but mere minutes later, I realized I was being tailed. At first I thought it was Ruijerd monitoring me, probably thinking I might get in trouble if left to my own devices. That didn't make sense after what had happened in the last few months, though. He would have joined me rather than tail me in secret. Besides, his ability to tail people was second to none. If it were truly him following me, there was no way I would have noticed.

I figured it wasn't Eris, either. She was terrible at shadowing people. I would have noticed her the second I stepped out of the inn, and she'd prefer to silently stick right behind me rather than skulk in the shadows, anyway.

So, who was it? Was there someone in this country who had a grudge against me...? I couldn't think of a soul. Besides, I'd only just arrived yesterday. It was likely I would stir up trouble in the future, but I hadn't bothered anyone yet.

Was this connected to something I did on the Demon Continent? Would someone really follow me all the way here for revenge? Unlikely. But maybe they were a survivor from the Zant Port smuggling group who'd spotted me by chance. Maybe they were planning to seize the opportunity to finish me off.

No, the most likely explanation was that they had absolutely no connection to me at all.

When I turned the corner, I caught a glimpse of a small figure ducking into the shadows. It was a child. Maybe one of the neighborhood children had decided to pretend I was a bad guy and tail me. Or maybe it was an orphan who was

planning to swipe my wallet. If I hid somewhere, they might panic and pursue me, and I could jump out and scare them.

No, wait. This world had races like halflings, who only looked small. I couldn't let my guard down.

I decided that I would give them the slip. With that in mind, I took a right at two intersections and then entered a slightly narrow alleyway.

"Hm...?"

I got the sudden feeling that something was wrong, a sensation like something rising from the depths of my throat.

Brushing it aside, I used magic to create a wall of earth. A three-meter wall rose up, sealing the alley behind me. I heard hurried footsteps on the other side as my stalker ran toward the wall, followed by the sound of something slapping weakly against it.

I'd gone pretty deep into the winding alleyways to lose that kid. Now, which way back to the main road? I felt a little like a lost child. Unlike the grid-like layout in Millishion, even the major thoroughfares in this town didn't run straight. Even someone with a good sense of direction, like me, was beginning to get lost.

I supposed that if it came to it, I could always use magic to boost myself onto a roof. Wait. Hang on—this alley was just like the one in the vision the Man-God gave me.

"Ah!"

I realized what the strange feeling from a moment ago had been. It was *déjà vu*.

Turning on my heel, I ran back down the winding alley. I got turned around at a T-junction, but managed to retrace my steps to the wall of earth I'd created.

"No, stoopp!" I heard a girl scream. "Give it back!"

I put my hand against the solid structure and channeled my mana into it. Using earth magic, I weakened the wall's composition while simultaneously using wind magic to trigger a shockwave. With a booming crash, the whole thing crumbled and fell away.

Before me was the vision the Man-God had showed me. A soldier roughly seized a lone girl's hand, while another held up some paper he'd taken from her, shredding it to pieces.

"That's for my father! Don't tear that up!" the girl screamed.

Amidst the echoing of her protests, the soldiers looked my way in confusion. "Wh-who the hell are you...?"

The girl had a face that resembled Lilia's, with Paul's brown hair pulled back into a ponytail. She was wearing a baggy maid's outfit. Her face, which would normally have been light-hearted and gleeful, was contorted with tears and streaming snot.



The soldiers had been glaring at her with obscene looks on their faces. Wait, no. That wasn't right. They looked like they *pityed* her. Were they doing this out of duty, rather than because they wanted to?

"Who are you?! State your name!"

"I'm that girl's..." I almost said "brother," but stopped myself. I wasn't supposed to give away my real name. "Uh... I am the Knight of the Shadow Moon!"

"What part of you is a knight? You're obviously a magician."

"Ugh..."

Dammit! Next time, I was definitely going with Evil Magician instead!

"Listen up, kid. It's nice that you want to play hero, but we're soldiers from the palace. This little girl just got lost, so we came to escort her home."

They clearly considered me nothing more than a mischievous child. I was sure they were lying about their intentions, but there was a troubled look on the other soldier's face as he regarded Aisha, who was still sobbing. Whatever was going on at the palace to result in Lilia and Aisha being detained, it didn't necessarily mean the soldiers in the rank-and-file were bad guys, too. Maybe I should just try to talk to them?

"But you guys tore up the letter she was holding."

"Ahh...that's, well, how to explain it? Adults have their reasons."

Uh-huh. Adults had *lots* of reasons.

"Ah!"

Aisha found an opening and smacked the soldier's hand away. She hid herself behind me and clung to my

waist, her face covered in tears and snot. “P-please ‘elp!”

Looking at her helpless expression and frantic demeanor, I suddenly didn’t care if I made enemies of this kingdom or not.

“Doseguhs dook muhledder and dore iddub!”

I had absolutely no idea what she was saying through her sobbing, but I could tell she was desperate. *Okay. Let’s put an end to this.* I was an adult on the inside. I couldn’t keep up the charade of a child playing at being a hero.

Without warning, I lifted my hand and silently sent a stone cannon flying at the soliders.

“Mnh!” The man I’d aimed it at instantly whipped out his sword and intercepted the cannon.

Whoa! That was some reaction speed! Water God Style, huh? That was going to make things difficult. But Stone Cannon wasn’t the only spell I knew. As long as I had some distance, this would be easy.

Even though you’re the first person to ever avoid my stone cannon, I thought.

“A magician who can use magic without incantations?!”

“Then—could he be the one?!”

“Call for backup!”

“Oka—aaah!”

I created a pit beneath the feet of the soldier who was about to try to run away. *Whoosh!* At the same time, I fired stone cannons in rapid succession to divert the other soldier’s attention. As I did that, I told Aisha, “We’re going to run. Can you do it?”

“Ngh, wah...yeah...!” She nodded, even through her sobbing.

Very good, very good. All I had to do was knock this one unconscious, and we could make our escape.

Tweeeeeee!

No sooner had I thought that than a high-pitched noise like a bird's cry echoed around me. It came from the hole I'd opened up. A whistle! That other soldier was blowing an alarm whistle!

Moments later, from all around—both close by and far away—other whistles joined the chorus. *Tweee, tweeeeeet!!*

Each one sounded slightly different, probably to let people identify their exact locations. Once my opponent saw that I had stopped launching stone cannons at him, he yelled, "We've created a blockade around this area! More soldiers will be here in a moment. Cease your futile struggle and hand over the girl! We won't hurt you!"

This area was about to be swarmed. However, I still had a card up my sleeve. "Aisha! Hold on tight!"

"Huh?!"

"Don't let go, no matter what!"

Despite her confusion, Aisha wrapped her arms around my waist and squeezed. I grabbed her shirt with my left hand and channeled mana into my right. Then, I conjured an earth lance with a flattened tip at my feet and used it like a catapult to launch us into the sky.

"Wh-waat?!"

"Aaaaaaaah!"

Ah ha ha! See you later, losers!

Incidentally, I broke both my legs when we landed. I was definitely *never* doing that again.

Chapter 4: **There Is No God**

Aisha cried for quite some time after we made our escape, big sobs that shook her whole body. She'd even peed herself. I understood how she felt. If a couple of scary men had grabbed my arm and threatened me, I'd probably be shaking, too.

Not enough to pee myself, though.

Those two soldiers were probably more gentlemanly than most, but it had to have been a terrifying experience for a five- or six-year-old child. Age gaps felt more pronounced the younger you were—high-schoolers could be as intimidating as adults to grade-schoolers. And the soldiers actually *had* been adults.

At least, I wanted to believe that was the reason she was crying and not the crack of both of my legs breaking when we landed. I quickly used healing magic to fix them up, but that definitely hurt.

Currently, I was avoiding mention of her little accident while silently washing her underwear. We were back at the inn. Eris and Ruijerd were both gone when we made it back, and they'd said they were going out to hunt down information, so they probably wouldn't return until evening.

Here I was, having yet another unusual experience. Just moments ago, Aisha had peeled off her small, baggy maid outfit. Once she shed her soaked underwear, I wiped down her undeveloped nethers with a moistened towel and gave her one of the shirts I normally wore.

I was left with a wooden pail, some soap, and a young girl's panties. A young, sobbing girl who'd peed herself in bed next to me, clad only in my baggy shirt after stripping naked, missing her underwear—my former self would have been incredibly turned on by this situation. Any dude who found himself in such a situation would be, right?

Oh, why didn't I give her fresh underwear to put on? That's obvious—I didn't have any for her. I'd been instructed never to touch Eris' panties, after all, and no matter how urgent the situation was, I couldn't break what was one of Dead End's cardinal rules. The thought alone was terrifying.

Ruijerd wouldn't save me if I broke that rule. I could use my demon eye to try and run, but Eris would be pissed for at least three days. If she did manage to punch me while I was defenseless, she'd deform my face so bad I wouldn't be able to taste food for three days...granted I'd heal myself well before three days passed.

Anyway, back to the story.

The situation was such that it wouldn't be surprising if my inner beast started howling. Yet my heart was as calm as the still surface of a lake. Forget being aroused, there wasn't even a ripple in the water. It was as polished and motionless as a mirror. That was odd.

I was troubled by Aisha's endless sobbing, but I didn't feel the least bit aroused. Had I become some kind of holy man while I wasn't paying attention? Or grown so terrified of rousing Eris's wrath that my pocket monster was now incapable of engaging in battle? Had I locked away my own memories to avoid facing my terror? No, that couldn't be it. *You're okay down there, right, little buddy?*

Those troublesome thoughts preoccupied me as I washed and dried Aisha's plain linen panties (which weren't sexy in the least) and maid uniform (which seemed to be

made of high-quality fabric). I handed them over to Aisha, who had finally stopped crying at some point, and she happily changed into them.

Even watching her do that didn't arouse me at all. Come to think of it, I'd never been interested in Zenith's breasts, either. I hadn't cared much about either gender or age in my previous incarnation, but apparently my current body's family were off-limits in this one. Life sure was a mysterious thing.

"My name is Aisha Greyrat! Thank you very much!" Dressed in her maid uniform, Aisha bowed to me. Her ponytail swayed with the motion.

Ponytails really were amazing. Eris occasionally pulled hers back into one, but hers made her look like a girl in a sports club. Aisha, on the other hand, looked more like an incredibly adorable doll. Her eyes were bloodshot, though, so maybe more like a cursed doll?

"Sir Knight, if you hadn't saved me, they would've dragged me away back there!"

When she called me "Sir Knight," I remembered that I'd introduced myself as the Knight of the Shadow Moon. A tendril of sweat trickled down my back. Maybe I'd gotten too carried away in my conversation with Eris. When I thought about how that name could be used to make fun of me ten years from now, I kind of regretted using it.

"Really, thank you so much." She bowed deeply again. Just how old was she again—about six? She was well-mannered for one so young. "Since you saved me, I have but one selfish request to make of you!"

“Sure.”

“Please give me pen and paper so I can write a letter! Also, please tell me where the Adventurers’ Guild is! I appreciate your help.” Once she finished speaking, Aisha bowed her head again.

At least she knew how to say “please” when she asked for help. She was a clever little girl. Ah, that was right—Paul had mentioned something about Lilia giving Aisha an extra-rigorous education, hadn’t he?

“That’s all you need? Do you have any money?”

“I have no money!”

“Weren’t you taught that you need money to send letters and to buy pen and paper?” It was critical to teach kids the importance of money from a young age. I doubted Lilia would skip something that important, even if there were *some* things children shouldn’t be taught until they got older.

“My mother taught me that if a girl like me looks up at someone with a pleading look in my eyes and says, ‘I want to send a letter to my father,’ then I won’t have to spend any money.”

Aha—Lilia, you scoundrel. Were you teaching your daughter to use her femininity as a weapon? As I realized that, Aisha’s mannerisms started to feel very staged. No, seriously, just what was Lilia teaching her?

“I’ve been trying to contact my father for a long time, but the people in the castle tell me no and won’t let me send any letters!”

I’d already heard that Lilia was being detained. Now I knew that they weren’t letting her or Aisha send letters, either. Maybe things were pretty serious here. When the

Man-God told me I needed to “save them,” I’d suspected that this was a situation where Paul was being cuckolded.

“Is there anyone else you could ask for help besides your father?”

“There isn’t!”

“For instance, someone your mother knows, like a girl who’s a little bit older than you and has blue hair? Or, perhaps...a brother of yours that should be out there somewhere?” I asked, completely nonchalant.

Aisha furrowed her brows. She had a look of dismay on her face, but why? “I have a brother, but...”

“But?”

“I can’t ask him for help.”

Why the heck not?! He just saved you a moment ago, didn’t he?!

“D-do you mind if I ask what your reasoning is?”

“Reason! Sure! My mother told me about my brother in great detail.”

“Okay.”

Aisha continued. “But I couldn’t believe any of it! Like being able to use Intermediate-tier magic at three and becoming a King-tier Water Magician at five? And then, on top of all that, becoming tutor to the daughter of the region’s liege lord? There’s nothing believable about that! She’s definitely lying!”

Well, I couldn’t blame her for thinking that. “But maybe if you meet him, you’ll see he actually is a good older brother?”

“Not likely!”

“Wh-why not?”

"My mom had this little box that she treasured, back home. She always told me not to touch it, so I asked why. Apparently, it had something really important to my brother inside it."

A little box... Come to think of it, I felt like I'd heard something similar from Paul before.

Aisha went on. "One time, when my mother wasn't around, I sneaked a peek. What do you think was it inside of it?!"

"I-I don't know, what?"

"Panties. Girl's panties. Judging by the size, a pretty young girl's panties at that. According to my calculations, the girl who owned them was probably ten years old. For a moment, I thought maybe my older brother was actually a sister, but they would have been too big for him. So there was only one person they could possibly belong to, and that's my brother's tutor. He was only four or five and he was already saving an older girl's panties for the future."

Calculations? Wait, hold on just a second here. This kid was way too smart for her age. What the heck? She was just five or six, right?

"Maybe you're just miscalculating?" I suggested.

"Nope. I gathered more information from my mother. It seems my brother would peek in on that girl while she was bathing, and he'd also watch my parents while they were getting it on. My mother was trying to cover it up, but I knew there was no mistaking it—my brother's a pervert!"

A pervert! A pervert! A pervert! There's no mistake, my brother's a pervert! And, just for kicks, once more: *A pervert!*

Okay, stop it! I thought. *My mental capacity's already at zero!*

"O-oh, okay, so your brother is a pervert. That's really rough, ha ha ha..." I'd brought this on myself, but really, I was in shock. I'd never imagined something like this would... Damn. Now I understood. This was why the Man-God had told me not to use my real name.

"By the way, Mister Knight, what's your real name?"

"It's a secret. On the streets, they call me the Kennel Master of Dead End," I answered, keeping a cool and composed look on my face. It was probably best for now if I held off on revealing that I was her older brother.

"Ooh! Mister Kennel Master, is it? How cool! I guess you can use summoning magic and stuff, right?"

"Nope," I said. "All I can do is exert control over two very ferocious dogs."

"Thats amazing!" Aisha had a sparkle in her eyes as she gazed at me, almost like a puppy.

A puppy that was being deceived, that is. That made my heart hurt a bit, but if I revealed I was her older brother, she might not be willing to listen to me. All I had to do was hide my real identity until I could dashingly rescue Lilia. Once I did that, it would greatly improve her perception of me.

"All right, I'm going to rescue your mother!"

"Huh?" She stared at me wide-eyed when I made that declaration. "B-but—"

"Please just leave it to me!"

And that was how Aisha and I met. She had the absolute worst impression of me, but not quite as bad as Norn's, considering I'd punched our father right in front of her eyes. Right now, she thought I was a pervert for holding onto Roxy's panties, but she'd eventually come to

understand that sometimes people needed something to hold onto.

That aside, why would she equate keeping panties with being a pervert, anyway? She wasn't old enough to link underwear to sexual desire yet. She wasn't even old enough to understand what sexual arousal was. If someone was teaching weird things to my little sister, they wouldn't go unpunished.

"By the way, Mister Kennel Master."

"Yes?"

"How come you know my name?!"

We'll leave out the part where I scrambled for an excuse until I finally spotted her name embroidered on the edge of her clothes.

Aisha told me what had happened in the past two years. She struggled with the details, resulting in a poor explanation, but I got the gist of what she was saying.

It seemed she and Lilia had been teleported to the Shirone Kingdom's Royal Palace. Their sudden appearance was suspicious, and they were both arrested. Lilia had tried to explain, but the powers that be decided to keep them both confined to the palace. Aisha didn't understand why, or what would happen next, but she did know that for some reason they wouldn't even let her send a letter.

Apparently, they hadn't done anything bad to Lilia, or at least nothing that left visible marks. Who knew what might be going on at night while Aisha wasn't aware of it? Lilia was getting on in years, so hopefully the possibility of people going out of their way to violate her was low.

It was strange that they were still being detained two and a half years after they were teleported here. Had Lilia

really failed to correct the misunderstanding in all that time? There had to be some other factors I wasn't aware of.

In the midst of all this, Aisha was trying to send a letter to Paul asking for help. She'd gotten lost, and figured that if she followed an adventurer, she'd eventually get to the guild. Apparently, that adventurer was me.

Aisha hadn't mentioned Roxy. Was she really not trying to help Lilia? No...it was possible that things were only this bad because Roxy was helping from the shadows. Whatever the case, all I could do now was wait for Roxy's reply. The Man-God had told me to send her a letter. Now that I had done that, the rest of the puzzle pieces should fall into place.

"Ooh, so you came all the way from the Demon Continent, huh?" Aisha was anxious to hear more about me.

"Yeah. I was caught up in the Displacement Incident in Fittoa as well."

"And what did you do before that?"

"I was a home tutor. I was teaching magic to a noble's daughter."

"Oh really? Where at?"

"Roa," I said.

"That's the same place as my brother! The two of you might have passed each other at some point!"

"Y-yeah. The possibility's as minute as a grain of salt, but it's there."

That aside, it seemed Aisha had learned a lot from Lilia. General common sense, etiquette, wisdom that would help in her daily life, how to be a maid, etc. It seemed suspicious to me that she could understand all of that at her age, but

at the very least, she knew it well enough to be able to explain it to me. Her powers of speech were advanced for her age, too. Perhaps she was just pretending to act like an adult, but she was still a clever one. Seriously.

Ever since she was young, she'd had the ability to soak up whatever she was taught like a sponge. I wondered what she would be like as she got older. Could I really maintain my dignity as an older brother?

"If you were teaching a noble's daughter, maybe her family was in contact with my brother's employer. Have you heard anything?"

"N-nope," I stuttered. "I'm afraid I have no knowledge of him."

"Oh, All right. I was hoping to hear what your impressions were of my brother."

"Uhhhhh, the only thing I ever heard was that the Young Miss at the Liege Lord's manor was very violent and impossible to manage." Much as I was tempted to drop some more information, Aisha was eventually going to discover I was her brother. I didn't want her realizing that I'd deliberately talked about myself while pretending to be someone else.

She asked me various things about the Demon Continent, and I answered in detail. I'd been worried I wouldn't know what to talk about with a child this young, but Aisha was so smart that we never ran out of topics. Strangely enough, I found myself genuinely enjoying what was basically my first real conversation with my little sister.

A few hours later, perhaps exhausted, Aisha fell asleep. Eris and Ruijerd returned after the sun had set, looking weary. Apparently, they'd gone all the way to the slums to

gather information, and a lot had happened, including a scuffle.

They'd gotten in a fight yet again? They looked apologetic, but this was nothing new, and I wasn't going to ask for details. Everyone messed up sometimes, even me. As long as we had each other's backs, it was fine.

I told them how I'd met Aisha, how Lilia was locked away in the castle, and how a lot of things about the situation seemed awfully suspicious. While I was at it, I told them I was concealing my name from her, too. I impressed upon them the importance of keeping my real identity a secret.

"Why are you being so evasive about this?" Eris asked.

"Apparently someone has fed her some misguided information about me. I want to show her my good side so I can correct her perceptions of me."

"Hmm. Well, I think you're cool just the way you are."

"Eris..." I tried to give her a grin that read *thanks for saying such sweet things about me*, but when I did, Eris took a step back.

"Ugh...why do you get that creepy grin on your face when I compliment you?!"

Apparently, my trademark look was a creepy one. That was a bit of a shock. *Someone please give me a new face...*

"Anyway, if that's what's going on, then let's attack the castle!" Eris exclaimed, totally ready and willing to throw down.

"It's been a while since I stormed a castle." Even Ruijerd was hefting his spear as if raring to go.

I hurried to cool their jets. "No, no. Let's just wait for a reply to my letter, for now."

Eris looked unenthused at my words. As usual, she just wanted to go wild. It certainly would have been simpler to dispense with subtlety and launch an attack on the castle, but that might land Roxy in trouble, and I wanted to be able to look her in the eye when we met. First, we needed to know exactly what was going on. It definitely wasn't just because I wanted to see Roxy, just so you know.

With that, the day came to a close.

The next day, a knight came to the inn just as the clock was about to strike noon. The armor they wore was similar in style to that worn by Aisha's would-be kidnappers, albeit of higher quality. I had the others wait in the room while I went down to the lobby by myself to deal with them.

"You are Lord Rudeus?"

"Yes."

"I am part of the Seventh Prince's imperial guard. My name is Ginger York."

I wondered why a member of the imperial guard was here. Then again, Roxy was tutoring a prince. "A pleasure to make your acquaintance. I'm Rudeus Greyrat."

The knight was a woman, and had come alone. She watched me without a flicker of emotion as she gave a knightly introduction and bowed. I returned it with a nobleman-style bow. I wasn't actually sure what the appropriate greeting was, but as long as I conveyed my sincerity, that was enough.

"Lady Roxy bids you come see her. Please accompany me to the royal palace."

She mentioned nothing about the events that transpired the day before. I hadn't hidden my face during the dust-up, but it seemed I hadn't been identified.

I hesitated. What was I supposed to do with Aisha? If I took her with me, they would know I was the one who'd attacked those soldiers with my stone cannon. I was just going to have to leave her behind. I could apologize to the soldiers once I had Roxy to help.

With that decided, I told Aisha not to leave the room under any circumstance and entrusted her protection to Ruijerd and Eris. Since I was going to meet Roxy, I double-checked my appearance before I left. My hair was combed, and I was in my usual robes. *Oh, right*, I thought. *I should get her a box of sweets*. I wondered what I should buy, since I hadn't seen her in such a long time.

It was then I happened to spot the ultra-unpopular Ruijerd figurine at the bottom of my tool bag. I recalled that in one of her letters, she'd talked about seeing a figurine of herself. It might be interesting to show her this one and tell her that I'd been the creator behind that one, too.

"You're being awfully thorough about this," Eris commented.

"It's been a while since I last saw my master."

"...You're going to formally introduce me to her, right?"

"Yeah, of course. I'll make sure to do that once everything is settled." I finished the last of my preparations.

"Are you sure you're fine by yourself?" Ruijerd asked in a worried tone. I often ran into trouble when I was left on my own, so I understood his concern.

"No problem. If anything comes up, I'll fly right back here." That was just a figure of speech, of course. I was

never going to take such drastic action that I broke both of my legs again.

“Mister Kennel Master...” Aisha said.

“Don’t worry. Just leave this to me.” She looked anxious, so I patted her on the head. She drew her lips into a line and nodded. *That’s a good girl*, I thought.

Led by the knight Ginger, I started toward the royal palace. We moved quickly along the edge of a main road, bustling with carriages going to and fro. The road had so many twists and turns and sometimes was so narrow that carriages couldn’t freely pass by one another. I assumed this was a countermeasure in case of an enemy attack. I’d heard of a town in the Mino region back in Japan that had streets like this.

Ginger seemed quite taciturn, so I didn’t speak unless necessary. If I asked her a question, however, she would respond. She was always polite.

“Okay, up next is this one!” An energetic voice boomed through the air. I turned my head in its direction. “She used to be a knight from the country of Washawa. This is a battle-ready slave! She’s a bit feisty, but she’s skilled! Three gold coins!”

A slave market occupied an area facing the main road. There, on a tall platform, was a line of slaves. There were three humans and one beastfolk with rabbit ears. Two of them were men and two were women. All of them had their upper bodies exposed. Even from this distance, I could see their skin shining. It was probably oiled to make them look more attractive.

I was sure the beastfolk had been taken from the Great Forest. I had no means or even an obligation to help them, but I did furrow my brow. I squinted at the Washawa

woman's bosom and felt my lower half react. I'd thought it strange I hadn't reacted to Aisha, but it seemed my little friend down there was still serving active duty.

I could hear the merchant beside the slaves explaining various things about them, but I couldn't make out the particulars. They were probably talking about each slave's selling points, such as their abilities and country of origin. After a few moments, the voices from the crowd grew louder. It was an auction.

If Lilia and Aisha had been unlucky, they might have ended up alongside those slaves. Their current circumstances didn't seem all that bad by comparison—not that I could say that for certain yet.

I realized Ginger was looking at the slave market with a wrinkle in her brow. Her duty was to maintain public order in the country. Perhaps seeing people doing such unscrupulous business out in the open bothered her.

"I thought the slave market was further inside," I said, by way of making conversation. The slave markets we'd seen had mostly been nestled further back within their cities. Slavery wasn't seen as a bad thing in and of itself in this world, but this was the first time I'd ever seen slaves sold this openly on a main street.

"Indeed. These types of auctions are always conducted further within the city."

"Then I suppose today must be some kind of event or something?"

"No. Yesterday, some adventurers apparently got into a fight in the area where the slave markets usually are. Since that location can no longer be used, they've temporarily relocated here."

A fight at the slave market, huh? Eris and Ruijerd had said they'd been involved in a fight. I had a feeling the two

things were connected, but it would only cause trouble if I brought it up.

"Pardon me," Ginger said as she suddenly grabbed me under the arms and lifted me up. "Please watch the proceedings from here."

"Oh, thank you."

She was giving me a better vantage point to see what was going on. She sure was perceptive. You definitely couldn't call her a beauty, but with her powers of observation, I was sure she'd find a nice husband someday.

"Lady Roxy would also hop around trying to get a look whenever there was a crowd."

"Really?"

"Yes. Although she always looked conflicted when I lifted her up like this."

I tried to picture it—Roxy hopping up and down while complaining, "*I can't really see.*" Then I pictured Ginger, with her good intentions, unable to just stand by and watch. Then finally Roxy again, looking disheartened as she'd say, "*Please put me down.*"

"You've held her up like this before?" I asked.

"Yes, and she got mad and told me to put her down immediately."

I knew it.

"Where did you grab her?"

"Where? The same way I did with you just now." She'd reached under my arms when she'd lifted me up just a moment ago.

"What was it like?"

"It was just like I said," Ginger repeated. "She looked conflicted and told me to put her down immediately."

What I wanted to know was what her skin felt like, but oh well.

"Please put me down," I said. "Let's hurry on." There wasn't anything particularly interesting happening. All I could see were the slaves about to be sold standing in an iron cage.

We turned back toward the palace and hastened our pace.

"What's my teacher doing at the royal palace?" I asked, thinking I'd found something we had in common to talk about.

"Usually she's teaching the prince, but when she's not busy, she joins the soldiers for training."

I seemed to recall Roxy had mentioned something along those lines in the letter she sent me when I was in Roa. "Ah yes, I heard how you conducted training under the premise that your opponent was a magician?"

According to Roxy's letter, the soldiers were training to deflect magic that she would throw at them while they were engaged in melee combat against one another. The principle was that learning to deflect magic that came at you suddenly during training would help you escape death when you actually faced such circumstances on the battlefield.

"That's correct. We are all Intermediate-tier Water God Style swordfighters already, but thanks to Lady Roxy, we can now deflect magic when it's suddenly thrown at us, too."

So that was why the knight from yesterday was able to deflect my stone cannon. It'd been a shock to see a no-name soldier defend themselves against my attack, but it made sense now that I knew it was thanks to Roxy's teachings.

We continued talking about Roxy for a little while after that. We talked about how it warmed the soldiers' hearts when they saw Roxy's face go pale after she burned a rug in the middle of her magic lesson. Then we talked about how her face turned pale again when a meal included bell peppers, and how she swallowed them whole without chewing once.

"I've heard about you as well, Lord Rudeus," Ginger said.

"Yeah? Wh-what did she say about me?"

"She told us that from a young age, you were a genius who could cast magic without the use of incantations."

"My teacher said that?" I asked.

"Lady Roxy bragged often about you. She said that she honestly felt like she wasn't even qualified to teach someone of your caliber."

"Heh heh," I chuckled. "That's an exaggeration."

We eventually reached the castle as we talked. It was quite a large one, though not as big as the Kishirisu Castle in Rikarisu or the White Palace in Millishion. It was about the same size as the one Eris and her family lived in. In other words, the country was about the size of a single region in the Asura Kingdom. *Way to go Asura Kingdom, you sure don't let a man down!*

"..."

Ginger gave a small bow to the guard at the gate. In response, he snapped stiffly to attention. "Thank you for your dedicated service!"

"Come this way." I started heading straight ahead, but Ginger guided me aside. We circled the castle and went through what looked like a back door. "My apologies for this. Only nobles are allowed through the front entrance."

“I understand.”

We came into what resembled a guardroom. There were two long desks with numerous soldiers sitting at them, amusing themselves with what looked like a card game. The second they saw Ginger, they immediately left their seats and stood at attention.

“Thank you for your dedicated service!”

Ginger again bowed slightly before heading deeper inside. I watched the men out of the corner of my eye as I followed behind her.

“Miss Ginger, are you someone important?”

“Among the knights, I rank about twelfth.”

Twelfth? It was hard for me to tell whether that was a high or low ranking. If it included all the hundreds of knights within this country, then it probably wasn’t low.

“This way.” Ginger led us way deeper and deeper into the palace. Her steps grew increasingly cautious as she went. She never climbed any stairs, but simply led me down one final hall and stopped outside a door deep within the core of the castle.

This must be Roxy’s room, I thought. It was located in an awfully deserted area of the palace, but that somehow seemed appropriate for her.

Ginger looked at what I had with me and held out her hand. “Excuse me, please hand over your staff and other belongings.”

“Oh, sure.” How kind of her to even go so far as to act like a doorman.

Ginger took my things and then pounded her fist against the door. “It’s Ginger. I brought Lord Rudeus with me.”

"Enter." It was a man's voice that responded.

Before I could process the doubt I felt at that, Ginger immediately opened the door and motioned me inside. Obediently, I went in.

"Oho...so *this* is Rudeus, huh?"

Seated before me, looking self-important, was a boy. He looked like a small barrel as he arrogantly reclined in his chair. Not just in terms of height; his arms and legs looked short, too. Almost like what you'd get if you combined a halfling and a dwarf. The only thing conspicuously large about him was his head, which was adult-sized. His face resembled that of an otaku, giving me a sense that the two of us were brethren. It wasn't an attractive face, though.

Standing at the boy's side were two maids. One of them looked familiar and the other didn't. We'll call the latter of the two Maid A. She seemed to be in her late twenties and was fairly normal-looking. As for Maid B, her face looked exactly like Lilia's. Actually, no...that was Lilia. Five years had passed, so she looked a bit older than I remembered. That was no surprise, given she was getting on in years on top of having been through the stress of the Displacement Incident.

"Mrgh?!"

Lilia was in a chair. There were ropes tied around her and her mouth was gagged. I didn't see Roxy anywhere.

"Huh? What the heck is this...?" Confused, I looked around. I thought Roxy was going to be here; that she was going to explain what was going on.

"Drop him."

At the sound of the boy's voice, the floor beneath me vanished.

By the time I realized where I was, I found myself trapped within a magic circle. The moment the boy gave the signal, the ground beneath my feet fell away and I dropped through a hole in the floor. It took me several seconds to realize what had happened. I was in a small room now, about six tatami mats wide. There was a magic circle drawn on the floor, faint light radiating from it.

I immediately tried to use an earth lance to lift me back up to the room above.

“...Huh?”

But the magic never happened. I tried again, channeling a greater amount of mana into my feet in order to conjure an earthen pillar, but nothing happened. That was strange. I could definitely feel the mana leaving my body. This was probably the work of the magic circle that surrounded me.

“A barrier, huh...?”

I reached out to the edge of the circle and found myself touching what felt like a wall. I tried punching it, but it didn’t even shake. I wasn’t getting out of here.

Still, I didn’t feel a sense of panic. Perhaps my mind didn’t yet fully grasp the situation I was in.

“Hahaha! It’s futile! Futile, I say! That’s a King-tier barrier that I had created so I could trap Roxy! Someone like you has no hope of breaking free of it!” The rotund boy from a moment ago came waddling down the steps in the corner of the room. He stood in front of me, a great big grin stretched across his face as he triumphantly leaned back.

“And you are?” I asked.

“My name is Pax. Pax Shirone!”

Pax? Oh right, the Seventh Prince. What was he planning to do by trapping Roxy in a barrier where she couldn't use her magic? Wait—in her letter, Roxy had described him as being similar to me. I was a gentleman. So it only stood to reason that he was going to do something very gentlemanly. A gentlemanly act of violence.

"Heh heh...I like that look on your face, Rudeus Greyrat." He chortled when he saw my frustration.

I put on a poker face and took a deep breath. *Calm down, I told myself, just calm down.*

"So I've fallen into a trap? I understand. I'll apologize formally for attacking those soldiers yesterday. But before that, please call Roxy here. I used to be her pupil. She can confirm my identity. Then I can call my lawyer and we can have a proper trial—"

"Roxy's not here."

Roxy wasn't there.

"What...?" I was even more shocked by his words than I thought I would be. Roxy wasn't here. That meant God wasn't here. There was no God.

No, that couldn't be possible. Did not the great mathematician Euler claim that God existed? Did he not receive an order from Catherine the Great and magnificently offer up proof that God was real? God did exist. I would do the same and prove that God existed myself.

"No. God is here."

"What? God?" Pax had a dumbfounded look on his face.

That's right, God. Make no mistake—if God wasn't here, there would be a holy war. Bring it on!

"Hm, so you're praying to God now? That's the correct decision, though it's already too late for you."

"That's true." I'd calmed down by now, so it was time to dispense with the jokes. "So judging by what you just said a moment ago, Roxy isn't in this country anymore?"

"Correct! You're going to be the bait that lures her back here."

"If you mean she's going to swallow me up, then that's been my lifelong dream," I responded off-handedly, trying to think. Roxy wasn't in this country, but this person wanted to get his hands on her. Why? Was he the reason she ran away?

Just as I thought that, Pax launched his next words at me. "I was surprised when I read your letter. I never thought Roxy's lover would try coming to this country!"

"What?! Roxy has a lover?!" Seriously?! I never wrote anything like that in my letter, though!"

"Hm? You mean you're not?" Pax asked.

"Don't be ridiculous! That's unthinkable! I'm an unworthy apprentice; there's no way such a relationship would develop between us!" I shook my head violently.

I was actually incredibly happy he'd made that assumption. Happy enough to make me want to wiggle with glee. I wanted to wiggle around like a certain rare reindeer. I wanted to wiggle around like a certain person living within a metal monster. But I forcefully restrained myself.

"Hmm...well, even if you're not her lover, she'll still come for her pupil."

"Will she really?" I asked.

"She will. Lilia may have been too weak to use as bait, but for you, the pupil whose praises she wouldn't stop singing, she'll definitely come! Then when she does, it'll be the end of her as a woman. She'll live the rest of her life as my sex slave! I'll make her give birth to five of my heirs!"

"Excuse me, can I ask just one thing?"

"What? Ah yes. I'll be sure to rape her the first time right before your eyes! Then I'll do it a second time after I cut off your head and see her face filled with despair!"

Boy, this kid had some wild delusions.

"Prior to coming here," I said, "I couldn't find any information about Lilia, so...how is Roxy going to know that I've been taken captive?"

Pax froze. "Hm...well she's incredibly capable, I'm sure she'll catch wind of it somewhere!"

Uh-huh. So it'd be fine because Roxy was capable. Perhaps she'd be able to find information that I hadn't been able to, but the odds seemed unlikely.

"But don't you think it would be better to let that information out into the world?" Not that I wanted to see Roxy get raped, but if he did that, word might get to Paul's ears.

"Hmph, I'm not going to fall for that! You're under the patronage of one of Asura's high-ranking nobles, aren't you?! I'd be making enemies of the Boreas family if they knew that I was holding you or Lilia in captivity, wouldn't I?"

"You would...?" Hmm. Something seemed strange here. Well, old man Sauros might try to help if he heard I'd been taken captive. But what did that have to do with Lilia?

"Lilia also tried sending letters numerous times! As if I would allow her to call for help!"

Why in the world was he not letting her write for help if the whole point was reeling Roxy in?

Ahh, I get it, I thought. He's a moron.

"Besides," he added, "I can just hand that information straight to her!"

"You can?" I asked, doubtful.

"I've been searching for her for the past two years, but I haven't found her yet! Still, one day I will! She stands out wherever she goes!"

Just because she stood out didn't mean he'd ever find her. She'd written in her letters that he was similar to me. That he had talent. Did that just mean her impression of me was this bad?

"Heh heh. It looks like you've given up. I don't care if you are a magician who can cast spells without voicing them—you stand no chance against me!"

There was no way I was going to lose to this guy! I glared at him.

"Ooh, I like the look in your eyes. Makes me shiver. I hope you'll keep that look until the very end. Ahh, I'm looking forward to it so much. Roxy, don't keep me waiting..." He sounded like a little boy pining for attention as he mounted the stairs, disappearing through the hole in the ceiling.

There's no way in hell she's coming, I thought to myself.

"Hey, who said you could remove Lilia's gag?"

"I'm sorry, but she seemed like she had something to say."

"That's not your decision to make!"

"Please, Your Highness. I don't care what you do to me, but please spare Lord Rudeus!"

"Shut up, I don't need anything from an old hag like you!"

"Aah!"

I heard a cry from the stairs above, accompanied by a dry slapping sound. Did he just slap Lilia?

“Anyway, have you still not found Aisha?!”

“Your Highness, we’re still searching for her!”

“Grr. What does the man who kidnapped her look like?!” I could hear the irritation in Pax’s voice. Apparently, they were talking about what happened yesterday.

This wasn’t good. I hadn’t concealed my face, so I was sure they’d figure out it was me immediately. I’d put the location of the inn in my letter, too. But oh well, so what if they found me out? Ruijerd and Eris were at the inn. As long as Ruijerd was there, I was sure he’d take care of things. Eris’ offensive skills had established their own reputation, too.

“According to the report, he called himself the Knight of the Shadow Moon. He’s a huge, brawny man who laughs loudly as he jumps from roof to roof like a pervert.”

“If it’s someone who stands out that much, why haven’t you caught him yet?! Dammit, you’re all so useless!”

“Yes, sir! My apologies!”

Hey, wait a minute! Excuse me, Mister Soldier! Please report the facts properly! Just what part of my body was brawny and muscular? Wait, no—perhaps the inaccurate report had been given out of kindness. Maybe they were trying to help Aisha escape. They didn’t seem like bad people when I met them, after all. Okay, good job, Mister Soldier!

“According to the report, we did tear up the letter she wrote.”

“And she can rewrite that letter as many times as she wants!”

“A high-ranking noble isn’t going to take action just because of a child’s letter. Shouldn’t we just forget about her?”

“No, no, no! Search for her! Don’t you care what happens to your family?”

“...I’ll dispatch a search party immediately!”

Then came the sound of frantic footsteps. Judging by the conversation, did that mean Ginger’s family had been taken hostage?

“Hmph. Throw Lilia in her usual chambers!”

“Yes, sir!”

“Lord Rudeus! I swear I’ll save you!”

“Shut up! As if I’d allow you to do that!”

“Aah!”

“Hmph. You knew Roxy too, didn’t you? I’ll have you beheaded in front of that impudent brat as well!”

Smack! I heard another dry slapping sound, followed by something being dragged across the floor.

“Rudeus! I’m never going to let you go!”

When I followed the voice and looked up, I saw Pax’s creepy face grinning down at me. Then, a lid was slid over the hole above. Quiet settled over the room as I was left with only the faint light of the magic circle as company.

“Phew...”

I felt somewhat dumbfounded. I should’ve been angry at Lilia being hit, but strangely, I didn’t feel rage rising up within me. Perhaps it was because the entirety of our interactions prior to that had been comical. Or because the Man-God had already told me she would be saved.

Then again, maybe it was because all of this was a product of Pax's feelings for Roxy, as warped as they might have been. I might have ended up the same way, had I been cast aside by her.

No, that wasn't it. It was because he *did* resemble me—the old me, before I was reincarnated. That was why I felt confusion rather than anger.

"Well then..."

Regardless, I understood the gist of what was going on. Simply put, Pax was the one who had captured Lilia. Then he'd detained her, using whatever pretext he saw fit, such as claiming she was the spy of a foreign power. As he listened to what she had to say, he'd somehow come to the conclusion that she was associated with Roxy, which was when he devised his plan. He would use Lilia as bait, contact Roxy, and lure her back here.

He kept this all secret for fear of the Greyrat family, but really, even if the Asura Kingdom found out, Lilia was nothing more than a maid. The secrecy—and the fact that they were unable to locate Roxy—was why Lilia had been detained for so long.

Lilia was surely trying to send Paul a cry for help, but the prince would not allow it. That was why Aisha had escaped the castle in an attempt to try to post her letter, only to fail and have her letter shredded.

What came afterward was what baffled me. For some reason the guards were falsifying reports to aid her escape. Did they just hate the prince, or was there another reason involved? It seemed like Ginger's family had been taken hostage, so maybe the other soldiers found themselves in a similar situation?

And I'd landed myself perfectly in the middle of their spider web. But I did write to Roxy, just as the Man-God had

instructed me to do. This was probably all part of how things were supposed to end up, right? There was no need for me to panic. Right now, I was doing exactly as I'd been told.

No...wait.

Had I really done things the way I was supposed to? For instance, I told the soldiers I was the Knight of the Shadow Moon. According to the Man-God's advice, as long as I told Aisha I was the Kennel Master of Dead End, everything would be fine. But maybe I was supposed to use that name with the soldiers as well?

That wasn't my only potential misstep. The same thing happened with the letter. I thought for sure I would be fine as long as I didn't say my name was Rudeus, but if I hadn't *written* my name on that letter, maybe things wouldn't have ended up like this? If the prince had thought I was just some acquaintance of Roxy's, perhaps things would have proceeded more peacefully?

Crap. Now I really felt like I'd screwed things up.

No, it was fine. It was still fine, right? This was still within expectations, right?

I was worried. For the moment, I decided, I would at least try to secure an escape route.

Chapter 5: The Third Prince

Hey there! My name is Rudeus and I used to be a shut-in.

Currently, I'm checking out a free apartment in the Shirone Kingdom. There's no security deposit and no rent. It's a one-room apartment that provides no meals and doesn't have much in the way of natural lighting. There's no bed provided, and the lack of a toilet means you have to resort to the old-fashioned way of pissing your pants, so living here for an extended period will no doubt result in serious illness. At least it's free!

It's also reassuringly secure in its construction. Please see for yourself how durable the barrier is! As long as you stay inside it, magic is nullified and you'll never be able to get out! Even if an A-ranked adventurer like me hits it as hard as they can, the barrier won't budge. It doesn't matter if you're a masterful escape artist—there's no easy way of getting out of this place.

Okay, that's the second time I've used this joke, so enough of that.

I can't get out of here. Someone save me. Ruijerd, hurry up and save me! Save mee, Rui!

I felt like Princess Peach waiting for Mario to come for me.

I spent an entire day after that trying to remove the barrier. Since I couldn't use magic while I was in it, there was basically nothing I could do. Mostly my attempts consisted of pounding on a wall I couldn't see, trying to

scrub at the circle on the floor, and trying to leap up toward the ceiling that was nearly four meters above me. I did everything I could, which basically amounted to nothing.

If I'd at least had my staff, I might've been able to smack the ceiling with it. Sadly, I'd given all my things to Ginger before I'd entered the room.

As for magic, I tried numerous spells, but they all fizzled before they could do anything. Like a shounen protagonist, I decided that if this barrier absorbed mana then I would unleash as much as I could and destroy it that way! But it didn't seem to have any effect. I could produce mana, but it didn't take shape. I couldn't use my mana to trigger a change around me. It *seemed* like I could, but I couldn't. It was like using a lighter in such strong wind that it blew out every time you clicked it. The gas was there, the spark was there, but there was no fire. Or maybe it was more like the fire appeared but was snuffed out immediately.

He said this was a King-tier magical barrier, right? It was incredible.

My impatience grew as I realized that I couldn't get out of here on my own. If the worst came to pass and Roxy actually came to help me, falling into Pax's trap in the process, there was nothing I could do to save her. All I would be able to do would be to scream for her to leave me behind. If Eris was the one that got caught instead, I could do nothing to help her, either. Once again, I'd be screaming for them to leave me behind. And what if Pax changed his mind and decided that he had me, so he didn't need other hostages, and tried to have Lilia killed?

I wanted to believe that everything would be okay, but I hadn't followed the Man-God's advice perfectly. Maybe I was already way off track. It was the Man-God we were talking about, though. Maybe he foresaw this. But according

to what he'd said, only Aisha and Lilia would be saved. He hadn't mentioned anyone else.

But no...he gave me that advice to earn my trust. It was difficult to believe he'd purposefully worded it to be deceptive. *Still, even then...* Negative thoughts kept cutting in and whirling around in my head.

Dammit, I thought. I need to hurry up and get out of here.

I wondered how much time had passed. I felt exhausted. It was the first time in a long while that I'd used so much mana.

"Phew...maybe I should rest for a bit."

There was no clock and I couldn't see the sun, so I had only a vague sense of time. My stomach was also empty and had been growling for a little while now. Don't tell me that prince had forgotten about my food, too? No, maybe that was the point. Maybe he meant to reduce my food intake and whittle me down until I was as dainty and brittle as a branch. That way, it would excite him more when he showed Roxy what I'd become. Just one meal a day then, huh? That would be terribly unpleasant, given that my body was still growing.

I couldn't break out of here through strength alone. Maybe I needed to twist this around in my head some more. How did people in my previous world escape from prison? They pretended to be sick or dead, right? Maybe they would temporarily power down the barrier to let a doctor or healer inside. No—it was also possible they'd just leave me to die. They already had another hostage, after all. If I were a Hollywood star, I could just strike out as the guard came by my cell, knock them unconscious and steal their keys. Sadly, that wasn't possible here.

What other methods were left to me? Really, I just needed to get out of here. Maybe I could pretend I was willing to pledge my loyalty to Pax.

"Truth is, that Roxy's been gettin' on my nerves for a long time now, boss. Heh heh heh! And actually, I know where her parents are! Whatdya think about doin' it in front of them, eh, boss?"

If I said it like that, he might actually fall for it, right? He did look like a moron, after all.

Nah, let's not. That wasn't possible, even for me. Roxy. I could abandon every last bit of my own pride, but the one thing I couldn't do was say something bad about Roxy.

Thump... Thump...

As I worried over what to do, I suddenly heard something. Footsteps. They were growing closer. Probably Pax coming to see how I was doing.

Thump...

The footsteps stopped directly above me. Then they cut across the room and I could hear them at the top of the stairs.

"Aha, just as Ginger told me."

The man who glided down the steps was someone I'd never seen before. I could tell with one look that he was likely part of the royal family, primarily because of how grandiose his clothing looked. It was black with gold embroidery and you could tell at once that it was expensive. He appeared to be about twenty. His face was similar to Pax's, but oval-shaped, with glasses resting above protruding cheekbones, and he was taller and thinner. In other words, he looked like your typical book nerd anime character with opaque glasses.

"I am the Shirone Kingdom's Third Prince, Zanoba Shirone," he said with a rigid look.

Third Prince? So, that meant he was Pax's older brother. "A pleasure to make your acquaintance," I replied. "I'm Rudeus Greyrat."

"Hm."

"And what brings you here today?"

"Hm." He nodded in an exaggerated way, and hoisted a bag in his hands. A bag I'd seen before. No wait—that was my bag! He left it on the ground and carefully extracted something from within. It was a figurine of a man wielding a spear—a Ruijerd figurine.

"Where did you get this demon figurine?" he asked, as he placed it just outside the barrier. "Tell me. I heard from Ginger that you brought it here with you." His tone was very demanding.

A demon figurine. I'd brought it with me without much thought, but perhaps carrying a demon figurine was like carrying a false god's idol around these parts. Roxy's figurine had no distinguishable demonic characteristics, but Ruijerd's was instantly identifiable because of the jewel on his forehead.

How was I supposed to answer this one? At the very least, I was sure I shouldn't say I was the one who made it.

"I just happened to pick it up when I was traveling on the Demon Continent."

"Aha! I knew it must have been a demon that made this! All right, where exactly did you acquire this? What did the person selling it look like? Do you know who made this?!"

Boy, he was really invested in this. His eyes were gleaming.

"Wh-who knows?" I said. "I just saw it and liked it, so I decided to buy it. I don't know any specifics about—"

"Whaar?!" A dangerous glint of light reflected off his glasses. There was something seriously intimidating about him. He had the eyes of a person who had killed before.

"Oh yeah! The merchant told me something when he sold it to me. He said that if you have that figurine in your possession, you'll be safe even if a Superd attacks you. Just show them that figurine and chant at them 'Ruijerd loves children,' 'Ruijerd loves children,' and suddenly the Superd will act like you're old friends from ten years ago. They'll sling their arm around you and say, 'Hey bro!' And stuff like that."

"Oho, oho! Yes, that's it! What else?! What else did they say?!"

"Uhh, you'll be blessed with perfect health and children. A-also, you'll get really good at swordplay?"

"No, no, not that! What you're telling me is that someone who is deeply involved with the Superd tribe created this, yes?!"

I wasn't sure those two things were related. The only Superd I knew was Ruijerd. But as for being deeply involved, maybe? Many in this world didn't want anything to do with the Superd tribe, so in comparison, yes, I was deeply involved.

"Hmm, it seems like there's a strong possibility this was made by the same person." Zanoba hummed thoughtfully to himself as he spun the figurine in his hand. Finally, he thumped it to the ground and reached back into the bag. The only other thing left inside should have been an emergency change of clothes.

"Then tell me, do you recognize this?"

What he produced from the bag this time was a Roxy figurine. He put it on the floor, then plunked himself down behind it.



"This demon figurine was discovered five years ago in the markets." He put his hand on his chin and gazed affectionately at the figurine.

When I'd tried to use the Ruijerd figure to proselytize, I found out that demon figurines were forbidden due to the influence of the Millis religious organization. I assumed Zanoba was looking to condemn the person who'd created them, although he didn't seem very angry.

"It was my brother who discovered this one. When he saw it looked like Roxy, our court magician at the time, he purchased it directly from the merchant in the market."

"Your court magician 'at the time'?" I clarified, noting the past tense.

"Hm? Yes. It seems you're unaware, but Roxy Migurdia has already left this country. She ran after being unable to tolerate my brother's unwanted sexual advances."

No, actually, I had already heard about that from Pax. But it made sense that she left after being sexually harassed.

"How exactly did your brother try getting friendly with her?"

"'Getting friendly'...? He stole her underwear and peeked at her while she was bathing."

Seriously? How awful. People like that needed to be severely punished. Such as having their computer smashed in with a bat. He should be forced to live under the same roof as a young miss with a killer punch that could knock your lights out in one blow. He should be stripped naked, thrown in a cell, and have cold water tossed on him. Shoot, I'd even be willing to conjure up an earth lance and slam it right into his ass. One thick and shaped like a traffic cone.

Anyway, seriously. Did he honestly think it was okay to steal Roxy's panties and all that? No, it was unacceptable. It was unforgivable. It didn't matter that he was a prince—he should still know right from wrong. It was no wonder she left.

Wait. By that logic, could it be...that Roxy had quit being my tutor because of the things I did?

"More importantly, on the issue of these figurines..." Zanoba said, patting the shoulder of the Roxy statuette.

That's right—we were best leaving this depressing conversation behind us. I nodded, my face solemn.

"I have a weakness for figurines. I collect them from all over the world," he started, as a sort of preamble. "This is the only one in my possession whose maker and origins I don't know. I know it was made of rock and chiseled down, but it's harder and heavier than the stonework used by the dwarves. No one in the world has the technique to chisel a sculpture this elaborate from such hard rock. For example... look here, at the staff. Even for the most adept dwarf, carving something so precisely in stone is incredibly difficult." He pointed to the weapon the figurine was holding as he spoke.

Complex pieces like the staff were easy to break. A lot of trial and error went into trying to compensate for that flaw. As a reward for my efforts, I managed to create something very tough and durable. I used the same material to make the spear on Ruijerd's figurine. It required a fair amount of mana, concentration, and time to achieve—more specifically, an entire day just for a centimeter of work. I'd dedicated a lot to perfecting my technique, so I was happy to hear it being praised.

"Something this incredible was being sold for a mere five Asura gold coins. I would have paid one hundred coins

for this. It bothers me that those living on the streets are so unrefined and boorish they can't appreciate its value. Granted, the price could be cheap specifically because it's a figurine of a demon. If one of the Millis faith's temple knights knew you were in possession of this, you'd be put on trial for heresy, even if you were a prince of Shirone. Then they would execute you for being a Demon God worshipper. There could be a number of reasons why this is being sold at such a low price." Zanoba put a hand to his forehead and shrugged as if exasperated.

Executed? Well, the temple knights were full of fanatics, apparently.

"I've searched for the creator of this figurine before. I don't care to get involved with a Demon God worshipper, but still, I want to speak to the person who created this. It was then that Lilia suddenly appeared at my door. Just one day after Roxy left."

Hm. So they'd coincidentally just missed each other.

"Lilia was taken by the soldiers, and after things finally settled, Pax took possession of her. This was one of the things she had," Zanoba said as he reached into the bag again and produced a small box, one I had no recollection of seeing. It was fist-sized. "She carried it with her like it was so precious. It struck me as odd. Look at it closely." He opened it so I could see inside.

There was something tucked into the folds of a soft-looking fabric, which he gently pulled away. Inside was a pendant carved of wood. I felt like I'd seen that sort of wood somewhere before. It was hand-carved, though you could tell it wasn't made by practiced hands.

"The pendant?"

"Hm, the pendant is irrelevant." He pinched it between his fingers and placed it on top of the bag. His movements

were so graceful. Still, what did he mean by “irrelevant”?

That was when I recognized the cloth that had been wrapped around the pendant.

“Now then, about these panties...” Zanoba pinched the fabric between his fingers and stretched it out. It was white and shaped like a home plate. I knew those belonged to God (Roxy) without a shadow of a doubt.

Those panties were the object of my worship.

“Lilia said she tried to send these to you for your tenth birthday.”

So the pendant was just camouflage. Zanoba had already deduced that the real treasure was the cloth wrapped around them. Perhaps Lilia had tried to send them as-is before, but realized it would look bizarre to send me underwear for my birthday, so she added the pendant.

Unfortunately, my object of worship (Roxy’s panties) had been washed. Roxy’s extra virgin olive oil had been cleaned away, so they’d already lost their divinity. God was no longer nestled in that pair of underwear. In her place resided Lilia’s sincerity.

“S-so what about the panties?” I asked, hiding the tremor in my voice.

Zanoba hummed and nodded, leaning forward onto all fours. “Before we talk about the panties, let me explain this figurine to you.” And so, he began to speak. The words came like a flood, unending, and he had a look of ecstasy on his face the entire time.

“First, look at it from the front. A glance will tell you that it’s just a normal magician wielding a staff. Look at the way the fabric wrinkles. The way she steps out with one leg, her staff clutched tightly in her hand and thrust out. The moment is captured so vividly. Then look at the hem and

sleeves of her robe, her wrists and ankles! The slight exposure of her skin. It's ever so slight, and yet it somehow has a sense of eroticism to it. It's from what little you can see that you realize this girl is thin, that her lithe figure is hidden within the depths of these robes. Her clothing is so loose around her, but you can tell!"

"Next, let's look at her from behind. Normally, you can't see the outline of the body in baggy clothing. But by putting the leg in front, the clothing is pulled tight so you can see just the slightest outline of her butt. A small butt. You probably wouldn't find it sexy at all if you saw it in real life. But the way it stands out in this baggy robe is exactly what makes it sexy! It's the way her butt is presented that makes you want to see more. And actually, you can do just that. If you unclasp the part that keeps the robe on here, you can see her innocent form clad in underwear. Not only that, but this girl isn't wearing a bra, either. A good decision for someone like Roxy, since she has such a small chest.

"Now if you turn the figurine back around, you see that her left arm is covering her breasts. Strange, you'd think, because her left hand was grasping her staff just a moment ago. But if you look at the robe you just pulled off, you realize the left hand was attached to it. That's right. This figure has three arms. One extra for when the robe is attached and another for when you reduce her to her underwear. With this little gimmick, it's like you have two figures in one. Truly genius. Normally, constructing a figure with removable clothing forces the pose to be static, but hiding an extra limb within her clothes gives a sense of freedom to her pose.

"That's not the only thing. Next, let's look at her from the side. When she wears her robe, the line of her back is curved and her leg is stretched out front. But when you take it off, for some reason she's slumped forward, almost as if

she's trying to hide her chest, her body. Now that you've seen that, look at her face. When she had her robe on, she looked dignified. Now, she looks like she's desperate to hide how shy she is, right?

"The person who made this understood that the impression given by the figurine would change with the clothes. That's why they knew they could leave the expression the same. This is an object of the most exquisite quality. Certainly, there are aspects of it that couldn't hope to compare to the nuanced skill of the dwarves. You might call it amateur at best. And yet, this figurine itself is in a realm far beyond what those crude dwarves could hope to achieve!"

I didn't miss a single word he said. Most people would've been flabbergasted by his spiel, but I was the creator of that figurine. I digested everything he said and was quite satisfied with his review in the end. That was a given, of course; never before had I heard someone talk so animatedly about something I'd made. Of course, he was exactly right. I'd used every skill I had at the time to create that figurine. Even though it was still the work of an amateur, anyone who looked closely would realize its potential. I was happy that he'd spotted even the minute details I'd labored to perfect. There was just one thing missing. It was the reason why I'd had her hide her breasts with her hand.

"Huh?" I voiced my realization. "The mole under her armpit is gone."

"Hm?" Zanoba responded, turning the Roxy figure over again. "Aah, the dark spot under her arm? I thought it lowered the beauty of the figure, so I shaved it off," he said off-handedly.

I froze at his words. My eyes widened and my body stilled. "Y-you shaved it off?"

"Yes, and the fact that you know about that means that you *do* know something about this figurine, don't you?"

I ignored him. "Turn the figurine around a little."

"Answer my question before I do."

"I said turn it," I barked coldly, surprising myself.

Zanoba let out a whine and shrank back, but he did as I said and spun the statue around.

"Stop it there. Now look at it again." I made him stop and look at the point on the figurine where you could just barely see where the mole had been. "Look where the hand is positioned."

"What are you talking about?"

"Don't ask, just look."

I could tell Zanoba was annoyed with the harsh tones in which I spoke. Still, he complied and looked at the figurine. He was quite the serious type.

"Can you tell that she's not quite covering it?"

"...Hm?"

I continued. "Can you tell that her hand doesn't quite reach it?"

"Ah," Zanoba said in a quiet voice. Finally, he understood why she was hiding her chest with her hand. He understood why, in a world where the concept of "eighteen or older" wasn't a thing, I chose not to reveal Roxy's modest, adorable breasts.

"Do you understand now why she's hiding her breasts but not hiding that mole?"

"No way...it can't be...!" Zanoba was trembling all over.

That was right. That was the exact reason I'd zeroed in on her mole. Since you couldn't see her nipples, the next

thing that stood out was her mole, and I had emphasized her embarrassment at not being able to hide both. In other words, the sexiest aspect of that figurine was the mole itself.

“I-I didn’t...understand at all...and I’ve defiled...this creation...!” His eyes went blank and his body started to convulse. Foam was spouting from his mouth. Wasn’t this a bit of an exaggerated response?

“Well, it’s just a mole. You can add it back on pretty easily. Anyway, what about the panties?”

“Th-the panties are... the same as the ones on the figurine...”

My gaze flitted between the fabric in his hands and the statuette. The underwear on it was exactly the same as my former object of worship. That made sense. I’d used the underwear I was most familiar with as a reference when creating the figurine. On a related note, Roxy had four other pairs of underwear at the time, the details of which were all a bit different. She was quite fashion-conscious.

“So that’s what this is about. All right, so what do you want me to tell you about the figurine, then?” No use hiding it anymore. If he was treating the figurine with this much care, then he probably wasn’t going to hand me over to the temple knights.

“Aaaah!” Zanoba’s entire body suddenly fell to the floor, slapping against the ground. It shocked me. “So you, my lord, are the one who created this figurine!”

And now he was groveling before me? I had no idea what was going on. The only thing I did know was how magnificent Roxy was.

“I would expect no less from a pupil of the Water King Magician Roxy! You made this figurine using magic, didn’t you?!”

How dare he use her name without a proper title.
That's *Miss Roxy* to you!

"My lord, I look at your creation every day. Every time I see it, I discover something new, and my respect for you only grows stronger. Please, allow me to call you 'master'!" He scurried across the floor like an insect as he spoke, trying to kiss my shoes, only to be repelled with a loud cry as he smacked against the barrier instead. He looked like one of those obsessed fans vying for the newest release on the third day of summer Comiket.

"Gaaaah! Why is this barrier here?! Who dared to put this here?! Master! Please allow me to pay my respects to your godlike hands! Pleeeeaaaaseeeaaah!"

And that was how I obtained a slightly creepy disciple.

I'd met people like this in my previous life. Most of them were people I'd met online—people I couldn't quite call friends. Now I understood—this was the face those people were making behind their screens. This must have been what the Man-God foresaw happening. I was to be taken inside the castle where I'd meet this guy, we'd bond and he'd lend me his power to help me escape. All right! The ending was now in sight!

I put on my best Buddha face and said, "My pupil. There should be a magical crystal in this room maintaining this barrier. Find it and destroy it!"

"Understood, Master! Once I've carried that out please, I beg of you, impart upon me your knowledge of the figurine craft!"

"You'll be excommunicated if you don't carry it out. Never again will I permit you to call me 'master,'" I said.

"Yes, of course!" Zanoba replied energetically. He began to search the inside of this room, then the room above, skittering across the floor as if he were a cockroach.

An hour passed, and the only thing that Zanoba discovered was a letter-sized hole in the ceiling with a removable lid. Apparently, that was how Pax intended to toss food down to me. That was all well and good, but how was the prince intending to deal with excrement and me getting sick from it? Perhaps he intended to toss a sleeping agent in here and lower the barrier while I was knocked out to deal with it.

No, let's be honest, he probably hadn't given it any thought at all. Pax was the kind of guy who thought taking care of a pet consisted merely of giving it food and nothing else.

At any rate, I could find a way to escape if we removed the lid covering the hole. The room had a high ceiling, but I could probably climb out if someone threw a rope down. Unfortunately, the heavy stone slab that acted as a lid was so firmly planted over the hole it was almost like it'd been welded there. Removing it would prove difficult. There was apparently another magic circle drawn on top of it, too. They seemed to be a set.

"Your highness, is there no one under your command who's knowledgeable about barriers?" I asked.

"I don't have anyone under my command!"

"Really, you don't? But even Pax had his own imperial guard."

"I traded the last of them for this Roxy figurine! Ahh, and what a wonderful deal it was!"

So this guy was a moron, too. Also, what the heck was wrong with this country if you could trade your guards away like that?

"All right...now I understand."

“Ooh, you do? Just what I’d expect from you, Master!”

“Yes. It looks like you’ll be excommunicated after all.”

“Whaaaat?!”

My creepy little disciple would be excommunicated with unusual swiftness... Actually, no. I had no intention of losing a helper I’d been lucky enough to obtain. I amended my statement. “Let’s change my earlier requirement. As long as you help me get out of here, I’ll make you my pupil once I’m free.”

“Yes! That’s completely fine with me! Just a bit, just wait for a bit! I’ll break through the ceiling with my fist!”

“Don’t be irrational.” I hurried to stop Zanoba as he glared at the ceiling, his hand curled into a fist. The look on his face seemed genuine. His face said he’d keep punching away at the lid until the bones in his hand were shattered to pieces.

Zanoba fidgeted for a while before suddenly looking up, as if he’d realized something. “Master, just who was it that created this barrier?”

“Uhh, judging by our conversation, pretty sure it was the Seventh Prince, Pax.”

“Hm, now that you mention it, Ginger did say something along those lines...”

“You mean you didn’t hear the specifics?” I asked, just to clarify.

“A bit. I was too busy thinking about figurines.”

“Oh,” I said, “okay then.”

At any rate, it seemed like this prince was in contact with Ginger. Ginger must have been making her own moves in the background—which meant she had her own issues with Pax. Zanoba said he came here because Ginger told

him about me. That meant that Ginger wanted the two of us to meet. She must have seen the Ruijerd figurine and thought we had similar interests. But what was her aim in trying to win over an undependable person like Zanoba?

Zanoba spoke up. "So, Master, that means I just have to do something about Pax, right?"

"Hm? Yeah, that would do the trick."

Zanoba thought for a moment and then spoke in a voice so quiet that the excitement he'd exhibited before almost seemed like a lie. "Very well. Please be patient for a little while, then."

"Uhh, before you do anything, please get someone's input first. Like Miss Ginger's, for instance. Or mine."

"Ha ha ha! Master, you really are a worrywart! Rest at ease, you can leave everything to me."

"Hey, wait a second! Where are you going? Listen to me! What are you planning to do?!"

Zanoba just laughed as he climbed back up the stairs and left.

"Are you kidding me...?" I had the distinct feeling I'd really screwed something up. Forcing this prince—who apparently had no servants of his own—to make a move felt like the equivalent of shoving a stick in a hornet's nest. A keen sense of foreboding came over me.

I should have just asked him to bring me some food instead.

However, as I would soon learn, I was completely mistaken. I had totally misread the man known as Zanoba Shirone. Looking back on what had transpired, I would come to realize that the course of events was probably decided

the moment Zanoba found out I was the creator of that figurine.

Chapter 6: A Speedy Resolution

Before I talk about how things resolved themselves, there's one factor I'd like to discuss. There was a child born into this world with an abnormality. The word *abnormality* probably makes you think of a physical condition, but most children like this looked normal by all accounts. The opposite was in fact true: the only thing normal about him was his appearance.

This child possessed a unique ability when he was born. You see, there were children who could run abnormally fast, had superhuman strength, had enhanced hearing, had a body lighter than a feather or were conversely incredibly heavy, could freeze anything they touched, could breathe fire, had poison-tipped fingers, could teleport short distances, could shoot laser beams from their eyes, could nullify any and every poison, could spend an entire day awake without feeling tired, or could have sex with hundreds of women at the same time without going soft... Such a child, who was possessed of superhuman abilities when they were born, was called a Blessed Child. If they possessed an ability that wasn't particularly useful, or even unfavorable, then they were deemed a Cursed Child, but we'll leave that aside for now.

Now that we have taken into account the existence of Blessed Children, let's talk about the Shirone Royal Palace. Currently, there were seven princes in the palace. The oldest was thirty-two, and the youngest was...well, the youngest didn't really matter.

In this country, when a prince was born, he was put in command of a number of imperial guards. The guards under

a prince's command would be his eyes and ears, so to speak, and would teach him how to influence people. If he played his cards right, the number of his guards would increase, and if he did something bad, they would decrease. When a king passed away, the prince with the most guards under his command would inherit the throne. That was the tradition in this country. The more guards you had under your command, the more power you wielded.

Under this system, the person with the most guards under his command was the First Prince. He was aware of his position as the oldest, and while he was a bit arrogant, he still conducted himself in a way that was appropriate for a member of the royal family. As a result, he had nearly thirty guards under his command.

So who was it that had the fewest under their command, then? Was it the one scorned by the soldiers, the Seventh Prince Pax Shirone? It was true that he had few guards under his command. At the moment, he only had three. At one point, this number had dwindled to just one, but Pax acquired a contact in the lawless area where the slave market was held, and increased that number by one. I'll get to the third member in a moment.

Pax didn't have many guards, but there was someone who had even fewer than him. That was the Third Prince Zanoba Shirone. He had exactly zero people under his command. He didn't even have a single guard. Just a few years prior, he'd had Ginger—the twelfth strongest knight in the kingdom—under his command. But even she, the last of his guards, was traded away to Pax for a certain figurine. Ginger had tried to submit her resignation, but Pax took her family hostage in a panic, forcing her to grudgingly become the third member of his guard.

Now then, about the Third Prince Zanoba Shirone. He was actually a Blessed Child, born with a superhuman ability

which made him unusually strong. Although his power was not a terribly exceptional one, the king still rejoiced when he was born, for this Blessed Child would be of great help to his country in the future. Considering the Conflict Zone just north of the kingdom, the birth of anyone whose strength could be used in battle called for people to throw their hands up in celebration. Zanoba's birth mother was a concubine, but his birth came as a joy to her, an assurance that she'd fulfilled her role.

The day when the hands raised in joy came falling down was just three years after Zanoba's birth, when the Fourth Prince was born. Fourth numerically, but the first born to the crowned queen. The child was treated like a precious jewel, eliciting joy from all as a party was thrown in celebration.

In the midst of that party, the three-year-old Zanoba shuffled up to where his brother was sprawled out in his bed. He reached out, touched his brother, and said, "How cute," and "You're just like a doll." Everyone smiled as they listened. Zanoba was very fond of dolls, so it warmed their hearts that he likened his little brother to his favorite thing.

But then Zanoba tore off his little brother's head as if he were a doll, and the party erupted in a pandemonium of screams.

The king and his queen were driven mad, condemning Zanoba's mother to exile. Zanoba remained in the country—in part because he was still young, but also because he was a Blessed Child. That was just how important Blessed Children were in this world. But as a result of that incident, Zanoba's guards dwindled from eight to just three. On top of that, the king ordered that he was not allowed to have more than that number.

The next incident occurred when he was fifteen. Although Zanoba still was a doll fanatic, he was now at an

age where he could now distinguish between human and doll. That was why he was paired with a wife, the daughter of a powerful family that had withstood countless attacks from the country of Vista in the Conflict Zone. It seemed the king intended to put Zanoba on the front lines in the event of a war with Vista.

The wedding ceremony concluded seamlessly—but that was the only thing that was seamless, because the day after their first night together, his bride was discovered in his bed with her head missing. Zanoba had pulled it off. The bride's family, mad with anger that their daughter had been murdered, rose in rebellion, only to be suppressed. The king took two people from Zanoba's guard and confined him to the inside of the castle. Then he tried to take Zanoba's favorite doll from him, but each of the soldiers who tried to carry out that duty had their heads ripped off.

After that incident, Zanoba became known as the Head-Ripping Prince. Everything he had done could not be overlooked, even as a Blessed Child. He was a madman who had killed the kingdom's legitimate heir and his own wife. The king even began to consider execution.

But as long as Zanoba had a doll, everything was fine. As long as he was periodically gifted a doll, he caused no harm. So, with time, the king began to see him as a dangerous weapon that just happened to have the shape of a human. After that, Zanoba was treated with exceptional caution. And that brings us to the present day.

I'm telling the story with bravado now, but I only found all of this out after it was all over. At the time, I didn't know that Zanoba was the strongest military power the Shirone Kingdom possessed.

Several hours passed after Zanoba told me to leave everything to him and strode off. He came back with his lips spread in a huge grin. In comparison, my lips were probably stretched taut in a line.

Zanoba just beamed at me as he held something in his hand. "Master, how about this? Now will you make me your pupil?"

"Ow, ow, ow, ow!! Stop it! Please, elder brother, stop!"

"Shut it, Pax!" Zanoba hissed back.

"Aaaaagaaaaah!"

The person he'd dragged in with him was his brother, Pax Shirone. I could see blood dripping from where Zanoba grasped his head. It wasn't Pax's blood, though. It was Zanoba's body which was entirely drenched in red.

I lost the ability to speak. I didn't know what was going on. I thought we'd had a light-hearted conversation about him being my pupil or something, but somewhere along the line it had become a gorefest. A smiling, blood-covered face only had appeal when it was that of a beautiful woman. The expression just looked bizarre when it was being worn by a gangly, nerdy-looking older brother character.

A number of people filed in behind Zanoba, as if they'd been following him. The first was Ginger, with her sword unsheathed. Three more knights in similar attire crowded in after her.

"Stop it, Zanoba! Take your hands off of him!"

"Th-that's right, Zanoba, please get ahold of yourself...!"

Hidden behind the knights were two princes dressed in expensive-looking clothing. Although I called them both princes, one was a bit too old to really fit the title.

Regardless, there were nine of us (myself included) crammed into the tight little space that was this narrow room.

“Elder brother, did you know that Pax took the soldiers’ families hostages so he could force them to do his bidding?”

“N-no...”

“And I do mean soldiers, the ones under the command of our father, not his own personal guard.” Zanoba was grinning, mouth stretched wide as he spoke. “It seems he took Ginger’s family hostage as well.”

“Is that true?”

“Yes, sir,” Ginger answered, her sword still held aloft.

The smile remained on Zanoba’s face. “Elder brothers, do you remember Roxy?”

“Y-yes. She was Pax’s tutor...”

“A King-tier Water Magician, who taught our country’s soldiers the secrets to facing a magician in battle, a person to whom we owe a great debt. Didn’t our father try to officially invite her to stay at the royal palace? And was it not Pax’s foolish actions that sabotaged and destroyed our relationship with her?”

“W-well yes...that’s true, Pax was in the wrong, but still, you—”

“And yet despite this...see for yourselves. Her pupil, my mas—I mean, Lord Rudeus—is being insulted like this. By Pax’s doing. The very pupil that Master Roxy said had even more talent than herself. Lord Rudeus, a true genius.” Zanoba’s smile never once faltered.

“Y-you always looked so bored when you attended parliament, but you were actually listening? As your brother, this brings me great relief. I was sure that you didn’t care at all about what happened to our country.”

"Elder brother, I'm only interested in dolls. All I'm doing now is revealing the truth of Pax's unlawful behavior. And there's only one reason why I'm doing that," Zanoba declared, lifting Pax into the air.

"Oooow!"

"Lord Rudeus is a wonderfully skilled, unsurpassable figurine maker. I cannot forgive someone like that being used as a pawn in Pax's revenge scheme!"

"Aaaaah! My head's gonna split open! It's gonna split! Gonna spliiit!" Pax's wail of pain reverberated throughout the room.

"Elder brother, if you decide to take Pax's side in this, I *will* act out."

The three knights and two princes went deathly pale. I wanted to jump in and say, "You're already doing the 'acting out' part just fine!" but the chill in the air told me that his definition of "act out" was on another level from what he'd already done.

"I'm not asking for anything difficult," Zanoba said. "I just want to save this figurine maker and Pax's bad behavior is inhibiting my ability to do that."

"But without Pax, the slave market is—"

"Elder brother, please don't make me say it again. Your younger brother's head is about to be torn off." Zanoba wasn't smiling anymore.

I had no idea what was going on. I was just confused, wondering if the words "torn off" were a metaphor. The one thing I did know was that the person in command of this situation was Zanoba. *Go on, my pupil, you can do it! Even though you're still scary as hell!*

"Nooooo, no! Stop it! Let go! Gingerr! Save me! Don't you care what—what happens to your family!"

"My family? They were all saved by Master Ruijerd last night," she answered.

"Whaar?" Pax struggled in his brother's grasp as Ginger coolly refused him.

Ruijerd had saved someone? Well, he was always saving people. I had no idea what was going on, but it seemed like things had been proceeding behind the scenes.

"Now you see where things stand, elder brothers. I have the least authority among us princes, and that is why I've come to enlist your help. If you should refuse, I will act out with every last ounce of strength I possess. From this distance, I could take one or perhaps both of your heads and rip them off. Though I'm sure the court magicians would burn me alive afterwards."

With this, one of the two (whom I assumed were the First and Second Princes) finally broke. "O-kay, fine! We'll do what you ask!"

"Be sure you look into this thoroughly, yes? Also, that girl who created all that fuss two years ago, Lilia, is being held captive somewhere in this castle. I'd like you to secure her as well."

"Yes, of course. I'll be sure to let Father know, too."

At that time, I didn't know that Zanoba was a Blessed Child. I just thought he had a ridiculous amount of confidence for someone so gangly. *It's dangerous to overestimate your own strength like that*, I thought, though it struck me as seriously odd how the two princes seemed so intent on defending Pax.

But as it turned out, I was mistaken. They were just terrified of Zanoba, the kind of terror you felt when faced with a bomb that was seconds from exploding. Even as I was released from the barrier, I still didn't understand.

Dumbstruck, I watched as Pax was carried off, Lilia was released, and the whole issue came to a close.

Several days passed before I finally learned everything that had happened. Let's start with how Lilia wound up being detained in the first place.

At the time, she was suspected of being a spy from a foreign power. When she was interrogated, she invoked Paul's and Roxy's names, which managed to keep her out of prison, but didn't completely dispel their suspicions. Instead, she was confined to the palace. When information about the Displacement Incident finally reached the Shirone Kingdom and it seemed like she might be released, Pax interfered and began manipulating the flow of information, which meant Lilia and Aisha were forced to remain inside the castle.

When Roxy fled, Pax established contacts in the slave market. Through them, he hired his own private army, then took some of his father's soldiers' families hostage to force their obedience. Those soldiers searched the slums in secret, and found where the hostages were being kept, but rescuing them proved difficult because they were heavily guarded. Frustratingly, they had to wait, and the days slipped by.

It was during that time that Aisha made her escape and the prince gave orders to pursue her. Reluctantly, the soldiers did as they were told and managed to track her down. That was when I appeared and made a magnificent show of carrying her off. Once the soldiers saw how I was trying to help Aisha, plus how I could cast spells without

chanting, they realized I was Roxy's pupil. That was when they began to devise their plan.

First, they started a fight in the slave market to throw it into chaos. Then, they used the fact that Aisha had been kidnapped by a mysterious man to get Pax's private army moving. After that, they'd planned to explain their circumstances to me and ask for my assistance in rescuing the hostages. I would help them attack the place where the hostages were being held now that its security was weakened, and in return, they would find a way to save Lilia for me.

But before any of that could happen, I sent my letter to the palace, mistakenly thinking Roxy was still in the country, and was then lured in and confined by Pax. If I had just waited another day before sending my letter, I could have listened to the soldiers' story and been the one to lure Pax into a trap, instead. Perhaps the Man-God had intended for me to save Aisha and *then* write my letter, not the other way around.

My capture should have been a setback for the soldiers, but when they went to the inn to find me, they found Ruijerd instead. He listened to what they had to say, got all riled up, and soon enough, he'd rescued all the hostages. Once the hostages were safely returned to their families, Ruijerd intended to charge the castle. The soldiers tried to tell him they would do it themselves, but he wouldn't listen.

Ginger, meanwhile, wasn't made aware of any of this. The soldiers had left her out of it because they worried it would be dangerous to involve someone under Pax's command. Poor thing. However, when the hostages were released, Ginger's family was spotted among them, so the soldiers took them into protective custody as well.

Ginger, thinking this was a good opportunity for her to make a move, passed on my Ruijerd figurine to Zanoba—the man with the most brute strength in this country. She'd calculated that he might see me as a valuable source of information and ally himself with me, but was also motivated by the fact that she'd sworn allegiance to Zanoba. Why would someone like Ginger remain loyal to someone who had traded her off in exchange for a figurine? There had to be a story there.

Anyway, the very next day, Zanoba killed two of Pax's imperial guards before taking Pax hostage. With that, the soldiers never got to carry out the last step of their plan. Instead, the incident came to a surprising close.

After all of that came to light, the king handed down his orders. First, Pax was to be banished from the country. It was unfortunate that this meant the loss of his contacts in the slave market, but it set a terrible precedent that he'd not only taken his soldiers' families captive, but the family of one of his imperial guards as well. On top of that, instead of gently coaxing a magician such as myself to join the royal family, he took me captive and tried to use me as bait to lure Roxy so he could assault and kill her.

In the interest of maintaining appearances, they claimed Pax was being sent off to study abroad. In reality, they sent him to the King Dragon Realm to be kept as a hostage—one whose death would be inconsequential.

As for Zanoba, he was also banished from the country. Again, they officially claimed he was studying abroad. His banishment was proposed by the first and second princes, who claimed the situation was partially his fault. In all honesty, they were probably just terrified of having such a nuclear warhead nearby, not knowing when he would explode or if they would be caught in the blast. The king seemed reluctant to let Zanoba go, but it seemed that dolls

could no longer reliably rein him in, and he was tired of all the problems Zanoba had caused thus far.

Lilia was released, although some still claimed that she was a spy for another country. To curry favor with Pax, she'd apparently been gathering information for him behind the scenes. It just went to show how amazing our Lilia was, that she could do something like that even in captivity.

In order to silence those claims, she was to be escorted all the way to Paul. Not to the Asura Kingdom, but to Paul. It did make sense, given that even if they did send her off to the Asura Kingdom, no one there could verify her identity. Paul currently had stronger ties to the Holy Country of Millis, and it was probably better to stay there than arouse unnecessary suspicion by returning home.

I was worried they might kill her on the way to keep her from talking, but Ginger volunteered to go along with her for protection. Zanoba had apparently commanded her to protect his master's family. Some of the soldiers whom Ruijerd had saved also offered to accompany them, so that put my mind at ease.

As for myself, the king personally invited me to stay in the region, offering to prepare a place for me as a court magician. Given his tone of voice and the way he sighed as he spoke, I could tell he knew he was asking the impossible. And of course, I refused. When I did, the king sighed again and told me I could leave.

That was all. There was no apology. The offenders were a royal family, after all. They weren't the type to apologize. The beastfolk had been more honorable, in that respect.

Once everything was over and I tried to leave the royal palace, Zanoba clung to me in tears.

“Maaaster! Are you truly going to leave? Are you truly going to leave your pupil behind?!”

“I’m sorry, but I have to hurry along on my journey.”

“Then could you at least make me a figurine before you go?!”

“Those take a lot of time to make, so I’m afraid I can’t.”

“Nooo!” The fact that I wouldn’t make a figurine for Zanoba made him so sad that he clung to me and wailed in anguish.

By now, I’d heard that he was a Blessed Child. I knew he was the prince who had massacred people by ripping their heads off, and I was on edge, wondering if he would suddenly decide to take my head off as well. Don’t get me wrong, I was grateful. But that didn’t change the fact that he was terrifying.

“If we happen to meet again, I’ll teach you how to make one of my figurines from scratch,” I said.

“What?!” he exclaimed. “No, but I—I mean, are you sure? Isn’t that a top-secret skill of your trade?”

“What kind of pupil would you be if I didn’t teach you anything?”

“Waaaaaaaah, Maaaaster!” he wailed, and threw me in the air.

I slammed against the ceiling.

“O-oh noooo!” Zanoba screeched. “Ginger! Healing magic!!”

“Yes, sir!” Ginger chanted a healing spell and my wounds closed. Zanoba, who had nearly killed me, was now pale and flustered. He looked relieved when I rose back up, healthy again. I seriously considered excommunicating him

right then and there, then reconsidered quickly. I didn't want him to rip my head off.

"All right, Master. Stay safe! I don't know where I'll be shipped off to, but I have a feeling I'll eventually run into you again!"

"Cough... yeah, you too."

Zanoba continued sobbing as he nodded, watching me go. Ginger watched the two of us with tears running down her cheeks as well.

And that was how matters in the Shirone Kingdom came to a close. Lilia and Aisha had been saved and sent off to Paul. Pax was banished from the country. I gained a pupil in the form of Zanoba. Some parts didn't go as smoothly as they could have, since I didn't follow the Man-God's advice perfectly. Still, everything ended in the best way possible.

It still felt like I was dancing right into the palm of the god's hand. It felt like I was watching a terrible play unfold.

And yet, everything seemed to be going in the right direction. Lilia and Aisha were both in good health. I didn't know what to think about Zanoba, but at least he didn't harbor any ill feelings toward me. I was sure Pax still hated me, but he'd been booted out of the country without any pawns to manipulate.

Leaving the ugly details aside, everything had turned out in a way beneficial to me. Come to think of it, none of the paths the Man-God had directed me on had led to disadvantageous results. Perhaps it was best to put more trust in him? No—a con artist only started duping people after they'd proven themselves successful once. I needed to exercise caution until I could be certain he was trustworthy.

That said, a promise was a promise. I wouldn't take a hostile attitude with him the next time.

Chapter 7: The Birth of My Little Sister, the Maid

We were at an inn in a small town within the Shirone Kingdom. It was here that the road forked, one path leading to the Holy Country of Millis and the other to the Asura Kingdom. This was where I was going to part with Lilia and the others.

Lilia and I sat at a table together, facing each other.

“That’s right! Ru—I mean, the Kennel Master is really incredible! If he gets serious, he can make rain flood over the forest and then freeze it solid!”

“You’re talking about magic, right? That’s amazing!”

“Of course! I have even more astonishing stories than that one. Want to hear?”

“Yeah, please tell me about them!”

Eris’ and Aisha’s voices flooded in from the outside window. Eris was boasting about the Kennel Master’s accomplishments. I smiled bitterly and turned my attention to Lilia. The two of us had talked a bit here and there in the past, but how was I supposed to approach her now?

While I was thinking, Lilia took the opportunity to strike up conversation first.

“Let me thank you once again, Lord Rudeus. I can’t even begin to express how grateful I am that you’ve saved my life not just once, but twice now.”

“Please don’t worry about it,” I said. “I didn’t do anything this time.”

“No. I heard how you caught a whisper of information about us and went out of your way to come to the Shirone

Kingdom,” Lilia said as she bowed her head low.

All I did was follow the Man-God’s directions. And then needlessly got myself stuck in a trap and needed help to escape it. If I still had the nerve to demand gratitude after all that, I should’ve been able to use that same nerve to accomplish more in my previous life.

“Please direct that gratitude to Ruijerd and Eris instead. They’re the ones who acted appropriately and led everything to a peaceful conclusion.”

“I spoke with them a bit,” she said. “But they told me it was all part of your strategy—”

“That was *not* my strategy.”

Lilia went quiet, then said, “If that’s how you feel.” She looked displeased, but it wasn’t like I was asking her to call something black when it was really white.

We fell into silence for a bit after that.

“Does Aisha...” Lilia began to ask, glancing outside the window, “...sometimes say things that are offensive?”

“Of course not. She’s an exceptional kid. No normal child could put that much forethought into their actions at six.”

“But she’s not as great as you. I tried to teach her as much as I could these past few years, but even now, my daughter’s too stupid to understand how amazing you are, Lord Rudeus.”

“Calling her stupid is going a bit overboard.” Besides, I’d had an advantage in the form of the memories from my previous life. I had considered the possibility that Aisha might be the same as me, but when I tried asking her about the existence of things like television and cellphones, she just stared blankly at me. The girl was just an ordinary

genius. Paul's genes, as it turned out, were actually pretty incredible.

"What do you think of Aisha?" Lilia asked, as if the question had just popped into her head.

"Huh? I told you, she's exceptional."

"I don't mean that. I mean her appearance."

"I think she's cute," I said.

Lilia pressed on. "She's my daughter. Do you think her bosom will develop as she grows?"

Uhh...what? I had no interest in my little sister's chest. Besides, what the heck were we talking about here?

"Lord Rudeus, if you intend to travel to Asura, please take Aisha along with you. I have to return to the Master's side, but Aisha can go along with you, can't she?"

"Can you tell me why you're asking this?" I deflected the conversation back at her.

"I've told her every single day that she would one day serve you."

"So it would seem."

"I've taught her every single thing I know. She's still young, but give her a few years and she'll have a body that all the boys will love."

A body all the boys will love, huh?

"Wait just a second. She's my little sister, you realize?"

"I know that you're a womanizer."

She did? Huh, okay then. Still, unlike my former self, it seemed I felt no desire for those related to me by blood. Which was why it made me uncomfortable when Lilia presented Aisha to me as if she were a gourmet meal prepared for my consumption. Those were my true feelings,

at least. "She's still only six, isn't she? She's at an age where she needs to be with her parents."

"If that's how you truly feel," she said.

Lilia looked disappointed, but I said nothing wrong. Aisha was still young. It was best for her to be with her parents, right? It was my feeling, as someone who was born Japanese, that it was best for a child to be with both of their parents while they were little. At least one, if not both, but definitely not *neither*.

"I understand. It's true that Aisha is still immature. I can't send her off with you when she's still so inexperienced."

"Uh, please don't teach her anything too weird, okay? Like...about me being a pervert."

"I've only ever told her how wonderful you are," she replied.

"And because of that, she seems to be rebelling..."

"Indeed. Though only for the moment," Lilia said with a quiet laugh, lifting her face. Her expression was bright and sunny.

I couldn't take Aisha with me, but I'd already received some precious things from Lilia. One of those things was hanging around my neck on a leather cord. The other was tucked away in a box for safekeeping. I wasn't going to part with it ever again.

"Thank you for the pendant." (And panties.)

"It was no problem. I know how precious those are to you." There was a hidden meaning in her words, of course, since she really meant the panties. I owed her a lot for everything she'd done for me.

"So, um...I guess carrying these around really does make people think I'm a pervert?"

“A pervert? Is that something Aisha said to you?” Lilia suddenly leaped out of her chair. I had to make a grand show of getting her to sit back down, where she let out a small sigh. “She was relatively free to move about the castle, so someone must have put strange things in her head.”

Strange things, yes. Very strange indeed.

“If underwear is enough to call someone a pervert, then what would happen if she went to work at the Asura Royal Palace?”

“The Asura Royal Palace?” I asked. “Come to think of it, you said you used to work in the inner palace, right?”

“Yes. Compared to what I saw there, you and the Master couldn’t even begin to be described as perverts.”

“Oh...really...” Apparently, the Asura Royal Palace was where the real gentlemen gathered. It made sense considering there was a certain noble family that I already knew loved furries. Nah—It wasn’t just the Greyrats that had such proclivities. The Shirone royal family was pretty terrible, too.

“One of them enjoyed women’s vaginal—”

“Nope, I don’t need a detailed picture, thanks.” I didn’t need to go any further than that.

“Anyway, there are many among the royal and noble families whose preferences run toward the perverse. Compared to that, having an interest in the underwear of someone you look up to is rather normal.” Lilia gazed off into the distance as she spoke. She was probably reliving an unpleasant memory.

“Please give Father my regards,” I said.

“Understood.”

"I'll give you some money to cover the trip, but if it seems like it won't be enough, just stop at an Adventurers' Guild and seek out one of Father's subordinates," I advised.

"Understood."

"I'm sure these soldiers escorting you can be trusted. But just in case, exercise extreme caution. They're still strangers."

"There's no problem there. I'm acquainted with all of them."

"Oh, you are? Then, um..."

"Lord Rudeus." Just as I was busy scrambling through my thoughts for anything else to say, Lilia stood up, walked over to me, and then hugged me to her chest. Her voluminous breasts smothered my face, and my breathing suddenly went erratic.

"Um, Miss Lilia, they're in my face."

"You still haven't changed from when you were little," she said with a small laugh.

The next day, before we took off, Eris, Ruijerd and I performed the final check on our carriage to make sure nothing was amiss. Lilia and the others were going to leave before us and had already switched over to a different carriage.

"Mister Kennel Master, Mister Kennel Master!" Aisha came flying out of the carriage, scrambling across the ground toward me.

"What is it?"

"Just a moment." She grabbed the hem of my shirt and dragged me along with her. I shot Ruijerd a look so he would understand, then went ahead and followed her.

The place she brought me to was a small thicket by the roadside. She crouched and gestured for me to follow suit. I did as she asked and leaned in close as if we were about to have a secret conversation.

"Mister Kennel Master, I actually have a favor I want to ask of you, privately."

"A favor? If it's something I can do, sure." If my cute little sister had a task for me, I would do my best to fulfill it. Norn already hated me, and I didn't want Aisha to hate me, too. I seemed to be in her good graces for now, but that was because she thought I was the Kennel Master.

"Please take me along with you."

My eyes went wide when I heard her ask that. Was this Lilia's doing...?

"Did your mom tell you to say that?" Perhaps she thought that since I refused her request, she'd use her daughter's tears to persuade me instead. Lilia was more cunning than I gave her credit for.

"No, there's no way my mother would be okay with that."

"Hm?"

"Every single day, my mother tells me about how I'm going to serve my half-brother in the future."

"She did say that," I agreed.

"But!" Aisha slammed her fist against the ground.
"I want no part of it!"

She *really* wanted no part of being around me. Probably because I got so aroused by underwear. Sorry, I apologized in my head.

"We talked about it the other day, right? My brother is a pervert. I understand what you were saying, Mister Kennel

Master, but I just can't bear the thought of serving someone like that."

"Is that right...?"

"So please, I beg of you, save me! Just as gallantly as you did the other day, from the evil hands of a pervert!"

"I'm going to pass on that." This was no joke. If the two of us traveled together, she'd learn my real name eventually. And when she found out I'd lied to her...wait. We were family, so she was going to find out eventually anyway, right?

"Why not?! He's a pervert!"

"That's just your imagination, not the facts," I said.

Okay! Let's set the record straight right here. If I entrusted this task to Lilia, I'd probably be known as a pervert forever. It didn't matter how much she said those in the royal palace were far worse than me—that wasn't going to change Aisha's impression of me. "You've never actually met him, have you?"

"But there's no mistaking those panties!"

"Maybe there's a reason for those," I suggested.

"And what reason could he have for treasuring panties?!"

Why? That wasn't really something I had a ready answer for...but, for instance, in monotheistic religions, people worshipped the clothing that a holy person wore, right? That was especially true when you considered these were the panties Roxy wore when she was rocking her one-handed lady band. This was a rare item that only the highest-level players possessed! If you were a player that cared about that kind of stuff, what would you do with it? You'd treasure it for the rest of your life, of course! The motto of my personal faith was "Lust and studies are both

important!” Combine the two and you got sexual studies, the golden standard!

Anyway, that aside...

“Roxy was your brother’s former tutor, correct?”

“Yes,” she answered.

“So she’s had a great impact on your brother, right?”

“I suppose so...”

There was no “suppose.” I was her big brother, so I knew what I was saying. Roxy was the person who helped me do something that I hadn’t been able to do in nearly twenty years. The reason I was living my life like this was because of Roxy.

“Then perhaps he wants to treasure it as an item that someone incredibly important to him wore.”

“Hmmm...” She didn’t seem satisfied by that explanation. In that case, why not give her an item that her idol the Kennel Master had been wearing?

I retrieved something from my pocket. “I’ve used this forehead protector for a really long time.”

“Why are you bringing this up all of a sudden?”

“Because I’m giving it to you.” I handed the forehead protector to her. It was something I’d bought a long time ago, back when we were in Rikarisu. Even though I’d washed it since, it still had a trace of my sweat, since I’d been using it for so long.

Aisha looked a little shocked as she cradled it in her hand. “Ah! Now I kind of understand.”

“Does it make more sense emotionally now, than it did when I just explained it with words?”

“Yeah, I get it now! So my brother wasn’t a pervert!”

And thus, I passed on the forehead protector I'd used for so long. That said, this kid was way too trusting.

"Mister Kennel Master, you really are a good person!"

"I'm not that great." I gave her my shining Rudeus Smile.

Aisha watched me with stars in her eyes, before she suddenly realized something and muttered to herself, "Oh yeah... Right now, my brother is still missing. If he's dead, will you allow me to serve you instead?"

"No, I'm not sure about that."

"You won't let me?" she asked. "I'm sure you'll understand after seeing my mom, but I think I'll grow up to be pretty amazing. With a body all the boys will adore!"

"A body all the boys will adore'... Do you even understand what that means?"

"It means a body that makes you want to start making babies when you see it, right?"

"A child shouldn't talk about making babies," I chided. At this rate, she'd be swept off by a pervert before she even came into her womanhood. Honestly, who the heck was teaching her this stuff?

"Is there nothing I can say that will change your mind? Do you hate me that much?" Her eyes glistened tearfully.

"All right, fine. If your brother is never found, then sure."

"You mean it?"

I felt bad for deceiving her. By the time she was older, my journey would be over and we'd probably all be living together again as a happy family.

"Then you're not mad at me for calling you a pervert?"

"No, of course no—huh?"

Wait, what did she just say?

“Thanks, big brother!” With that, Aisha shot back up and ran off to the carriage. I sat there dumbfounded as she leaped up into it. When the carriage rolled into motion, Aisha turned back to wave at me, and Lilia bowed. “See you, big brother! Let’s meet again! It’s a promise!”

And off they went.

Eris had a completely unamused look on her face as she said, “What the hell? She completely saw right through you.”

“H-how...?”

Ruijerd gave the horse’s reins a tug and the carriage jerked into motion. In retrospect, there were many opportunities for her to realize the truth. I called her by her name when we first met, and when I was speaking to Eris and Ruijerd after that, I’m pretty sure they let my name slip, too.

So why did she pretend not to know? *Think, think*, I told myself, and the answer came quickly. She was probably trying to determine for herself if her brother was someone who could be trusted. If I’d kept up the charade of being the Kennel Master and tried to drag her along with me, I had no doubt she would’ve turned her back on me.

“Haha.” Once I realized that, I laughed. She truly was a brilliant, clever little girl. I looked forward to seeing her once she was older.

Chapter 8: An Adult

We left Shirone Kingdom and traveled far, far westward. Our destination was the Asura Kingdom. The road leading to said country was flat and the weather just warm enough to make you drowsy. On either side of the highway were fields of grass as far as the eye could see, and directly ahead was the faint outline of the Red Wyrm Mountains. Above them, you could see slowly circling shadows. It was tranquil.

On occasion, bandits who totally couldn't read the situation would approach and demand we drop our coin and leave. Eris would kindly grant them their wish by offering her iron fist, sending them scuttling off into the distance. Ruijerd wanted to slaughter them all at first, but once we heard how they were simply hurting for food, he decided to let them go for now. But just this once.

Even though this was the Central Continent, the highway around these parts wasn't particularly safe. I wished they would take notes from the Demon Continent. Bandits never went out there, although in exchange, monsters showed up in ten times the number.

The fact that people could do as they pleased here was proof of how peaceful this region was. If we traveled just a bit farther to the north, there was a jumble of small countries duking it out. In fact, that conflict was probably the root cause for the rising number of bandits here.

Now let me explain the geographical features around these parts for a bit. The Red Wyrm Mountains were a huge

mountain range that stretched across the Central Continent, splitting it in three parts, with Red Wyrms residing within them. Red Wyrms were said to be the strongest monsters on the Central Continent. Their strength was fearsome enough one-on-one, but they typically gathered in hordes of several hundred.

Of special note was their detection ability. They never missed anything that encroached on their territory, even animals as small as a dog. And it didn't matter how fierce the opponent was—the wyrms would swarm together and devour it, bones and all. If you trespassed on their turf, you died. That was common knowledge in this world.

There were a number of different dragon species in this world. Every single one of them was A-ranked or higher. Among them, the Red Wyrm was the most ferocious and dangerous. A single one was a low S-rank, but they always came in groups and they always held vast territories. And since the mountain range was the place these creatures called home, it came to be known as the Red Wyrm Mountains: an impassable mountain range that was a symbol of death.

The Red Wyrms were dangerous beasts, but they actually had one weakness. They had excellent combat abilities, but were terrible fliers, and couldn't take flight from flat terrain. To fly, they needed to leap off tall cliffs or run down a long slope. Although the Central Continent had tall mountains, the land was mostly occupied by rolling plains and forests. Therefore, it was rare for those living on the plains to be attacked by a Red Wyrm.

Granted, there was the occasional idiot amongst the horde that would get caught by a turbulent wind or something and fall to the plains. The high king that falls from the heavens loses its power...or so the saying went, but these guys didn't lose their power. Those that fell close

to a human village wreaked havoc, bringing devastation to the area. When this happened, the villagers would call in soldiers or adventurers to deal with the disturbance. Even though these extermination requests were S-ranked, parties of about ten people were formed to lure the creature into a trap, making them relatively easy to hunt. As it stood, dragon meat and bones were top-quality materials to make armor with, and their skin was highly valued as a work of art. Of course, it wasn't just those parts which had value. The entire body of a wyrm could be utilized for something or other.

Although the prize money was distributed among teams of ten for taking down one of these creatures, it was still enough money for each of them to live lavishly for a year. To be more precise, one dragon was worth about one hundred gold pieces. Even though they couldn't accept the mission directly, there were apparently a lot of C-ranked newbies who would impulsively take on the challenge just for the lucrative materials they could harvest from a wyrm's body. Of course, most of them were barbecued alive and then devoured.

There were two points of passage through these mountains in which vast numbers of Red Wyrms dwelled. These were gorges sandwiched between two sheer precipices, known respectively as the Red Wyrm's Lower Jaw and the Red Wyrm's Upper Jaw. These ravines had existed since the time of the Second Human-Demon War and were the only paths at the time that were wide enough for soldiers to pass through. Anticipating that, Laplace had taken the opportunity to unleash Red Wyrms on the armies that tried. Ruijerd confirmed that story, so there was no doubt about its veracity.

Our carriage was moving toward the Red Wyrm's Lower Jaw, which connected the southern and western regions of

the Central Continent. Once we made it through there, we would be in the Asura Kingdom. However, we were taking a roundabout route to detour around the mountains, and there was a young miss amongst us who detested indirect paths.

“We don’t need to detour around this thing. We have Ruijerd with us; we could cut right through those mountains!” Eris said, being completely unreasonable as she looked at the Red Wyrms cutting slow circles in the sky above the mountain range.

“Don’t be ridiculous,” Ruijerd answered with a bitter laugh.

I had considered that we might be able to cross the mountains with Ruijerd in our party, but even he found that idea impossible. In that case, I didn’t stand a chance. After all, I couldn’t defeat Ruijerd.

“But Rudeus could definitely do it!” Eris huffed.

“No, there’s no way. What are you talking about?”

“Ghislaine said that she slew a Red Wyrm straggler before!”

“She did?” I’d never heard that conversation. Maybe it wasn’t one of the stories from her time as an adventurer. If it had been, Paul would have surely boasted about it.

“From what I heard, she battled one before she became a Sword Saint!”

“Oh? All by herself?”

“Uh, well, there were about five others who were Advanced-tier swordfighters with her, she said.”

“And how many of them died?” I pressed on.

“Two,” Eris replied.

You moron, I thought. That meant their group took a 40% loss. What in the world made her think I could defeat one of those creatures?

“Besides,” I said, “there’s a difference in strength between stragglers and the ones here in these mountains. After all, these ones are in the air, you know?”

Flight gave wyrms at a huge advantage against humans. This wasn’t a video game where having a flying trait made you weak to bows and arrows. Plus, they moved in swarms. It was one thing to face off against the King Dragons, whose groups consisted of only a few wyrms, or the Black Wyrms, which didn’t form flocks at all. With the way Red Wyrms swarmed in the hundreds, there was no way you could hope to pick them off one by one. “Am I right, Mister Ruijerd?”

“Yes. You don’t have a hope of standing against a Red Wyrm horde. If there was anyone that could, they would be the mightiest champion amongst the Seven Great Powers. Even the North God and Sword God would likely turn back halfway through.”

“You really think so?” Wow. I thought the Seven Great Powers could easily dispatch dragons, but it seemed I was wrong.

“Yeah, their stamina would most likely wear out halfway through. Not like you could sleep with dragons around.”

That made sense. You’d have several hundred of them attacking you relentlessly, even at night. Combat strength aside, they’d overwhelm you with sheer numbers.

“That said, Laplace subjugated the King of the Red Wyrms, so those ranked at the top of the Seven Great Powers could probably pass through without issue. Though if we’re speaking of the Seven Great Powers of old, even the

God in last place could have passed through the Red Wyrm's territory undisturbed, I'm sure."

"But I'd still like to hunt one of them someday..." Once again, Eris was voicing her usual dangerous ideas. I was sure I'd be enlisted to help her when that "someday" came.

Another tranquil day. Just a few more and we'd arrive at the Red Wyrm's Lower Jaw.

I was thinking about the Man-God while I prepped a meal for the party. More specifically, about what happened in the Shirone Kingdom a few days ago. To be perfectly honest, it felt like things were going a little *too* well for me. Perhaps the Man-God, his premonition notwithstanding, also had the power to change the future.

No. Even if I hadn't been carrying that figurine with me, I had a feeling Ginger would have lured Zanoba into meeting me anyway. And he would still have brought his Roxy figurine, still have given the same speech, and I would have still pointed out the mole he'd removed.

What if I had actually used my real name with Aisha? Alone at an inn with her perverted brother... If I were her, I'd have feared for my chastity. Aisha was a clever girl. She was trying to get a letter sent, so she might have stolen my money and made a run for it.

I was sure I would've searched for her if that had happened. As soon as I knew she was missing, I would lose all composure and, without any thought for the consequences, blast my magic into the air to make contact with Ruijerd. I'd tell him that I'd found my sister but she ran

away, and he'd help me search for her. He was kind to children. I was sure she'd trust him.

The more I considered it, the more I started to think that the Man-God's advice was meant to ensure things turned out more or less the same way no matter what I did. It was probably happening right now. Even if we hadn't decided to accept Ruijerd's help, he would somehow have ended up traveling with us, anyway. No matter which eye I selected from Kishirika's arsenal when I met her, I would've still been captured by the Doldia tribe in the Great Forest.

The Man-God was taking a lot into consideration as he gave me advice. Perhaps I *could* trust him. However, just as before, I couldn't fathom his motives. If I could just figure out what he wanted, then I could be more honest with him.

As I mulled over my conversations with the Man-God, Eris and Ruijerd were sparring together as usual. Lately, Eris had gotten so strong it was a real eye-opener. Just a year ago, I could've beaten her easily by using my demon eye. I might even have been able to pull her panties down in the midst of combat. Now, that was impossible. I would probably still come out on top if I used my demon eye and all of my mana, but even then, it would be close. I'd certainly win if we started the battle with some distance between us, but a long-distance battle would rob me of the possibility of physical contact during the heat of battle, so you couldn't really call that a victory.

Back to the conversation about talent. I thought I worked pretty hard, but Eris went above and beyond. The quality and quantity of her hard work put mine to shame. My body just couldn't keep up. My stamina was pretty average by Japanese standards, but by the standards of this world, I was mediocre.

As I was preoccupied with those thoughts, the day's training came to an end. "We're done."

“Haa, haa... yeah...”

Lately Ruijerd had stopped asking Eris if she understood their training or not. It didn't need to be said anymore. Eris was naturally soaking it up.

“Eris,” Ruijerd suddenly said, as she came over to where I was standing.

“What?” Eris took the wet rag I'd wrung out and handed it to her. She slipped it inside her clothes, wiping away at the sweat. She used to strip down to just her bra and wipe it off, but I got too turned on by that, so now she kept her clothes on, even though it probably felt gross having all that sweat on her body. *Sorry, I apologized internally.*

“From this day on, you can call yourself a warrior,” Ruijerd said as he sat himself down.

A warrior, huh? Not a swordfighter, but a warrior? Why was he...? Ah. I finally understood what he meant.

Eris slipped her hand under her armpit to wipe away the sweat, then stopped. “Does that mean...?”

“You're an adult now,” Ruijerd said quietly.

Eris' movements went jerky as she tossed the rag back to me. I used water magic to rinse it, then twisted it tight and smacked it in the air to wring it out. Eris took a seat beside me. I'd seen this expression on her face before. It was the kind where she was so happy that a big grin was threatening to spread across her face, but she was trying to hold it back, thinking she needed to act more reserved. “B-but, Ruijerd, I still haven't defeated you at all!”

“That's not a problem. You already have a sufficient amount of strength as a warrior.” Perhaps this was his way of giving Eris his approval. Just as Ghislaine had when she permitted Eris to use the title of Advanced swordswoman,

Ruijerd was now doing the same by telling Eris she could call herself a warrior.

"Congratulations, Eris," I said.

Her eyes darted to me in surprise. "R-Rudeus, this isn't a dream, is it? Could you pinch me?"

"You won't punch me if I do?"

"I won't punch you."

Since I had her word, I reached out and pinched her nipple between my fingers. Gently, of course. Or maybe sexily is more the word in this case?

Eris' fist, on the other hand, was *not* gentle. "Where the hell are you pinching?!"

"Sorry...but it's not a dream. If it was, this wouldn't hurt so bad," I said, face turning pale as I clutched my jaw. In contrast, Eris' face was bright red as she covered her chest with her arms.

"That's right, a warrior..." She looked down at the palm of her hand as if she could finally feel the power that was held there.

"But don't get a big head. That means I'm not going to treat you like a child anymore. Got it?" Ruijerd sounded more like a parent warning their child.

"Yeah!" Eris wore a meek look as she responded, although her cheeks were twitching, threatening to give away her grin.

Our meal today looked even more delicious than usual.

That night, just as Eris was settling down to sleep, something was bothering me. I called to Ruijerd, who was on lookout with his eyes closed. "Why did you say that to Eris?"

He cracked his eyes open slightly and looked at me. “Because no matter how much time passes, you keep treating her like she’s a child.”

...Okay, let's think about this. Was Eris a child or not? She was twenty years younger than I'd been when I died in my previous life. I'd also been her incredibly patient tutor since she was little, even as she'd used me as her personal punching bag. What was wrong with me seeing her as a child?

Sure, Eris had grown more and more mature of late, and not just in terms of how her body had developed. Slowly but surely, she had started to learn right from wrong. She rarely ever went on a rampage without thought for the consequences anymore. Her wild instincts hadn't completely gone away, but the frequency of her outbursts had decreased. You could say she was in the process of going from a child to adult. Or so I liked to think, as if I were better than her, not that you could call me a shining example of an adult, even as a form of flattery.

“Hmm...”

Ruijerd quietly shut his eyes. “Ah well, it's all right if you don't understand.”

For some reason, I had a bad feeling about this. This felt an awful lot like the kinds of final conversations characters on TV had before they got killed off.

“Mister Ruijerd.”

“What?”

“Please put this gold coin in your breast pocket,” I said, slipping one out of my own to toss toward him.

He looked bewildered. He didn't have a pocket in his vest, after all. Still, he managed to successfully tuck it into a seam close to his breast. “All right, and what's this for?”

"A good luck charm."

Satisfied, I went to sleep.

A few days later, we finally reached the entrance to the Asura Kingdom: the Red Wyrm's Lower Jaw. Four months had passed since we set out from the Shirone Kingdom.

When things happened, they happened quickly. Specifically, bad things happened when you least expected them. In my old life, my parents had died suddenly. My siblings coming at me had been sudden, too. Paul had shipped me off to be a tutor without warning. Being transported to the Demon Continent had also been abrupt.

There was something else I had yet to realize, and it was how harsh this world really was. How easily people died. No matter who a person was, death could come in an instant. There were no exceptions to that.

It would take me a long time, but eventually, I would come to understand death as a phenomenon that abruptly robbed me of those closest to me. If I'd known this back then, I wouldn't need to lament so deeply now. *If only I'd been more serious about getting stronger—strong enough that I wouldn't be defeated by anyone.* After what happened, I couldn't but be consumed by regrets, wishing I'd walked a slightly different path.

There was one thing I could say, though.

Eris never failed to impress me.

Chapter 9: The Second Turning Point

The Red Wyrm's Lower Jaw was a ravine with a path that cut directly through the mountains. The road wasn't as straight as the Holy Sword Highway, but didn't split or fork, either. It was a territory between country borders that was claimed by no one. Once we got through it, we'd be in the Asura Kingdom.

We were in high spirits, sensing the end of our long journey. We were a bit concerned because we didn't know how much our home had changed, but we were also starting to feel a sense of accomplishment. You could say that we let our guard down.

It was along that path that they came, walking steadily from the opposite direction. They weren't riding horses, they weren't sitting in a carriage; they were just walking. There was a man with silver hair and golden eyes who wore no real armor to speak of, only an unassuming white coat made out of some kind of leather. My impression of him was simply that he had a dangerous look in his eyes, and that was about it. His irises were small enough that you could see the whites all around them.

My eyes were more drawn to the other person, a young girl with black hair who followed behind him. Upon closer inspection, her hair was more of a dark brown shade, a slightly ashen color. I didn't usually remember people by their hair color, but it shouldn't have been hard to remember someone with pure black hair. Except I couldn't recall anyone like that.

There was another reason this girl caught my eye. She had a mask pulled over her face. It was pure white with

nothing drawn on it, a mask with absolutely no decoration. There was nothing particularly memorable about it, and yet if you saw it once, you'd never forget it. If I were to liken it to anything, it would be one of the peel-off face masks from the world of my last life. Since it stood out so horribly, I doubted it was a fashion statement.



Since I was so captivated by this girl's appearance—well, not *that* captivated—I didn't notice Ruijerd sitting in the driver's seat, his face white as a sheet. Eris was the same way. With each step the man took, bringing him closer, her face hardened and her grip on the hilt of her sword grew so tight that her hands turned white.

When the man noticed us, he gave a curious tilt of the head.

"Hm...? You...could you be a Superd?"

Doubt crept in when I saw his eyes, with their small irises, narrow. Ruijerd had shaved off all his hair and the jewel in his forehead was hidden. How did the man know? Did Ruijerd exude some kind of smell that gave him away? As I considered the possibility, I turned to look at Ruijerd.

"Is he an acquaintance...?" My question was cut short by the look on Ruijerd's face. His white skin was even paler than usual, beaded with cold sweat. His hand was trembling as he gripped his spear. That expression...I knew what that was.

Fear.

"Rudeus, whatever you do, don't move. Eris, you either." There was a tremor in Ruijerd's voice.

I still had no idea what was going on, but I nodded wordlessly. Eris' face flushed bright red and she looked like she might leap forward at any moment. Her arms and legs were trembling. Had the two of them met this man at some point, when I wasn't aware of it?

"Hm? That voice... You must be Ruijerd Superdia? I didn't recognize you at first without your hair. What are you doing here?"

The man casually approached us. Ruijerd readied the spear in his hand. On a whim, I decided to use my

demon eye.

“The man’s body splinters into multiple images.”

There were so many of them I couldn’t see the exact outline of his body. What the heck was going on?

“Hm? The one with the red hair... Eris Boreas Greyrat, huh? And the other...who are you? Not a face I know... Oh, well. I see what’s going on, Ruijerd Superdia. You love children, so these two must be the ones who were teleported to the Demon Continent during the incident. You brought them all the way here.” He had an all-knowing look on his face as he nodded.

Eris was shocked and shouted back, “H-how do you know my name?!?”

I felt even more confused by her words. So this was the first time they’d met? I mean, this was Eris we were talking about, so it wouldn’t have been surprising if she’d simply forgotten. But this man wasn’t exactly forgettable, with his silver hair and the way the whites of his eyes showed around his irises. Then there was the matter of the abnormal reaction that he evoked in both Eris and Ruijerd. If she’d met him before, there was no way she would have forgotten.

“Who the hell are you?! And why do you know my name?!?” Ruijerd thrust his spear out toward the man. Apparently, he didn’t know this guy, either. What the heck was going on...?

Ruijerd was famous. He wasn’t well-known on the Central Continent, but if you went to the Demon Continent, there were many who knew his name and his face. I wasn’t so sure about Eris, but if you’d heard her described as a young red-haired swordswoman, then you could make a rough guess as to who she was.

There was more to this strangeness. There was the man's attitude...or rather, the difference between that and their reactions. He came across as friendly. His voice was flat, but—and I didn't know where it stemmed from—there was a quality to it that made him sound happy, like he'd been reunited with old friends.

Ruijerd's behavior was the complete opposite, acting as if he might attack at any moment. Except he hadn't yet. He was treating this man as an enemy, but he hadn't launched an attack. Even Eris, who was always the first one to attack, hadn't moved. And it wasn't just because Ruijerd had told her not to.

"This is a curious place to meet you...but you seem well. That's good." The man stared at Ruijerd, who still had his spear pointed at him. Then he laughed in a self-deprecating way and took a step back.

Seeing that, the girl with the mask muttered, "Are you sure?"

"It's unavoidable at this point."

It was a conversation I couldn't understand, lacking any context of what they were talking about. And once it was over...

"I'll stay out of your way." The man walked slowly over to the side. The black-haired woman followed him.

Ruijerd kept his eyes trained on the man. And of course, so did Eris.

"You'll know who I am...eventually," the man said, his words measured and meaningful.

Intuitively I felt that this man knew *something*. I felt a vibe from this man that was the same as the Man-God's. I had to get him to tell me what it was.

“Please, wait!” Before I realized it, I’d called the man to a halt.

He looked back, face etched with surprise. Ruijerd and Eris also looked at me with shock on their faces.

“What is it? What do you want?”

“Ah, greetings. My name is Rudeus Greyrat.”

“Never heard of you.”

Well, it *was* our first time meeting, after all.

“Wait, Greyrat, is it? What are your parents’ names?”

“Before we get to that, uh, what’s your name?” I asked.

“Hm... All right, I’ll tell you. I’m Orsted.”

Orsted? Not a name I was familiar with. The only character with a similar name that I knew of was the one who died and kept spouting apologies from the other side. I glanced at Ruijerd and realized he didn’t seem to recognize the name, either. “Are the two of you acquainted?”

“No,” Orsted replied. “Not yet.”

“Not yet? What does that mean?”

“You don’t need to know. Now, who are your parents?” He coldly brushed me off.

He wouldn’t even answer my questions, and yet he expected me to answer his? Well, whatever. I wasn’t going to get upset over something that minor. “Paul Greyrat,” I said finally.

“...Hm? Paul shouldn’t have a son. He should have two daughters.”

Well that was rude. I was right here, looking just like my father. The idiot son who went all the way to the Demon Continent to make money.

“...Hm.” As if he’d realized something, Orsted tilted his head. Slowly he approached me.

“Don’t come any closer!” Ruijerd threatened him.

“Yes, I know.” He stopped, maintaining his distance, but stared right at my face. I matched his gaze. “You don’t turn your eyes away, huh?”

“I’d like to turn them away as soon as possible, since the look in yours is so terrifying,” I said.

“Hm, so that means you don’t feel any fear?” His brows furrowed. “Hmm. That’s strange. I have no memory of meeting you.”

Nor did I. This was our first meeting. I didn’t know the name Orsted, nor did I recognize his face.

“So, what do you want?” he asked.

“Um, well, I just thought maybe you knew something about the Displacement Incident.”

“I don’t.” He didn’t shake his head, but simply rejected the possibility outright.

Huh. Something about his attitude toward me was kind of weird. As if he were being cautious around me. As if he were being more distant with me than he’d been with either Ruijerd or Eris. Well, anyone would dislike being rudely stopped by someone only to be needled about this and that. Even if he did know something, I probably wasn’t going to get him to tell me about it.

“All right then, I’m sorry to have stopped—”

It was exactly then, right as I was bowing my head in apology, that he said it. “You. Are you perhaps familiar with the name ‘Man-God’?”

Finally, he’d said a word that I could understand.

Part of the problem was that I'd let my guard down, thinking that our conversation was already over. Another part was that I'd purposefully avoided saying anything about the Man-God to anyone, and now suddenly someone had spoken the god's name, particularly a person who so thoroughly confused me. So, naturally, thinking that this was knowledge we both shared that would continue the conversation, I reacted to it without thinking.

I replied ever so casually, "I do. He's appeared in my dream—"

Suddenly, my vision changed.

"Orsted's hand is going to spear right through my chest."

It was so fast, as if he were teleporting. I couldn't avoid it. A second was just far too short.

"Rudeus!"

The vision suddenly disappeared and Ruijerd wedged himself in front of me. He blocked Orsted's attack and I was sent reeling backward. Orsted peered over Ruijerd's shoulder, glaring at me. His eyes were cold.

"So that's it. You're one of the Man-God's disciples."

In the same instant that I found myself thinking Orsted was making a false charge, Ruijerd was shouting at me, "Rudeus! Run!"

"You're in the way, Ruijerd Superdia!"

Ruijerd swung his spear.

I couldn't move. It wasn't that I didn't try to run, just that I didn't even have a chance to try. Ruijerd was taken out in a matter of seconds. All I could do was watch as Orsted easily batted him away, much like a human swatting a fly.

Ruijerd was strong. At least, he was supposed to be. Even Eris hadn't managed to defeat him once during our entire trip. He had five hundred years of experience in battle, which should have made him practically invincible. He should've been stronger than a King-tier swordsman. And yet, I could tell with my demon eye that he'd lost. Through the eye, I watched the whole thing from beginning to end. Time-wise, it probably only lasted all of ten seconds.

There was no way that Orsted was faster than Ruijerd. It was just that with every move Ruijerd made, he was at a slight disadvantage. In the span of a second, this was repeated three to four times. Each time he moved, he dug his grave deeper. Bit by bit, he was driven into a corner. Each time he tried to attack, his balance suffered slightly, and each attack he tried to launch was stalled.

A difference in ability—that's the only way I could describe it. Orsted's skills just overwhelmingly surpassed Ruijerd's. Enough that I could see it clearly with my eye.

Orsted was clearly drawing Ruijerd into a trap. He was moving as little as possible and yet at the fastest speed possible, rendering Ruijerd powerless. If a perfect combat strategy were made a reality, this was probably what it would look like. Orsted picked the perfect intervals to move in, putting himself at just the right distance for Ruijerd's spear to effectively reach him. It was as if Orsted were mocking Ruijerd, purposefully putting himself in a position to invite powerful consecutive attacks, only to throw him off balance, cause him to stagger, creating openings in his defense, and forcing Ruijerd to guard himself against heavy counterattacks.

There was nothing Ruijerd could do about this. There were no methods left to him. He took a fist to his solar plexus, then a second that grazed the tip of his chin. The third, which robbed him of his consciousness, was a fist that

bore right down on his temple. Ruijerd rolled twice across the ground before he stopped moving entirely. Orsted could probably have killed Ruijerd on the third punch if he'd wanted to, but he didn't. Even with someone as remarkable as Ruijerd as his opponent, Orsted was able to hold back.

"Now then."

"Hyaaaah!"

The one screaming wasn't me. It was Eris. She leaped in front of me and whipped her blade toward Orsted, fast as an arc of light.

"Secret Technique: Flow." Orsted wasted no time against Eris. All he did was gently stop her sword with the palm of his hand. At least, that was how it appeared to me. And yet, that was enough to send her spinning through the air. She flew as though she'd been hit with a Saint's ultimate technique.

Eris had been outside his line of sight. As soon as Ruijerd was done in, she launched her attack from his blind spot. It was an incredibly deft offensive, as far as I could tell —she wasted no time thinking of defense, but jumped in to attack with everything she had. In return, Orsted had used only one technique of his own to disable her.

Wait. I'd seen something similar before. Paul had shown me something like that. It was a Water God Style technique, though Orsted's execution was even more polished than Paul's had been.

"Aaah...!"

Eris crashed into a cliff face. Rocks crumbled from the impact, and she landed with a thud. She was incredibly tough, so I didn't think she was dead, but she might have broken a bone.

"Eris Boreas Greyrat, you've honed your skills quite well. I believe you have potential, but...you're still unpolished."

"Ugh... uurgh..." Eris let out a groan and tried to get back up.

Normally, I'd heal her immediately at this point. However, I didn't have the opportunity to try. After all, Orsted's eyes were boring into me.

My companions were both defeated in mere moments. The whole time, I'd kept my demon eye activated, but all I could see, one second into the future, was despair. I saw that no matter what I did, he would do me in. I watched as my future self, just one second from now, had his vital points destroyed. My head, my throat, my heart, my lungs... I watched as each one of those were crushed, and at the same time, I had a vision of him just standing there, unmoving. I didn't understand what was going on. If this vision was true, then in a second from now, there would be five of him.

I couldn't move. I knew that no matter what I did, it was futile. That whole second passed with me unable to do anything. He slid forward, as if defying the laws of physics, and in an instant he was right before me. It was so sudden, like animation without enough frames.

In the instant after he appeared before me, his attack was already over. I'd seen movements like this in some video game a long time ago. It was a post-apocalyptic game where every character had an endless combo or a Fatal KO.

Six of my ribs were fractured simultaneously. There was an impact, but it was different from the kind that sent you flying. In the same instant, I felt the pressure of another attack hit me from behind. The damage accumulated inside my body. My lungs were crushed.

"Uughhh!" In a split-second, blood gushed up through my throat and I was vomiting red.

"It's best to collapse a magician's lungs," he said nonchalantly as I sank to my knees.

I experienced an *aha!* moment of acceptance somewhere within me as I watched my lifeblood pool on the ground below. Crushing a magician's lungs was the best course of action because then they couldn't chant a spell. This meant I'd lost my ability to use healing magic. And of course, with my lungs destroyed, I couldn't stay alive.

"When you die, be sure to deliver a message to the Man-God for me. Tell him that the Dragon God Orsted will be the one to kill him." The Dragon God. Number two on the list of the Seven Great Powers.

Orsted gave me a glance as I curled up on the ground, hands at my chest, and turned on his heel to leave. I realized he'd let his guard down. Since I'd already received a fatal wound, I hadn't just been defeated—I was at death's door. I didn't know why, even in that state, I was still thinking about trying to fight back. Perhaps it was because, on the edge of my vision, I could see Eris trying to stand up. More likely, it was because I thought that now that this man was sure I was going to die, he was going to finish off the other two as well.

Regardless, I launched a stone cannon at him. Why didn't I use more powerful magic? After all, I had Advanced-tier magic at my disposal if I wanted to use it. Even later, I never figured out the answer. In that moment, I was most likely just using the magic I was most familiar with.

I launched the hardest rock I could, at the fastest speed with the quickest spin. That stone cannon was so powerful, even I was surprised. The rock burned red-hot as it flew the short distance from me to him.

“Orsted is going to look back and smash my stone cannon with his fist.”

And so he did. With the sound of clinking metal, it crumbled and fell to the ground in pieces.

Orsted looked at his fist. “That was a stone cannon just now, wasn’t it? That had some incredible power to it. For you to be able to injure me with such magic is impressive.” The skin of his fist was peeled slightly. I’d barely grazed him.

It was no good. I couldn’t damage him with my stone cannon.

“I was sure I crushed your lungs, so you must be using voiceless magic? Is that a power you gained from the Man-God? What else did he give you?” Orsted stared at me. He could have just finished me off, but instead, he was watching me as if I were a grasshopper whose legs had been plucked off.

“Ugh...!” I conjured wind magic to force air into my lungs. I choked violently. I knew there was no point to it, but I forced the air in anyway, filling my lungs, before I stopped breathing.

“An amusing use of magic. What purpose does that have right now? Why not use voiceless magic to heal your lungs?” Orsted put his hand to his chin, watching me as if he enjoyed seeing me suffer.

Even as my consciousness dimmed, I formed a ball of fire in my right hand. With fire magic, the more mana you poured in, the stronger the heat and the bigger it got. If my stone cannon’s speed and hardness didn’t work, then I would try heat and explosive power.

“That’s enough. Disturb Magic!”

My feeble thoughts of resistance were easily blown away. The moment Orsted aimed his right hand at me, the

mana that was beginning to take shape at the tip of mine was swept away. No matter how much I tried to channel mana into my hand, it took no form and dissipated. Even though I was half-conscious, I understood. There was interference with the mana in my hand that disrupted it and rendered my magic ineffective.

He had sealed my right hand, but I still had my left. So I lifted it and conjured magic between Orsted and myself, unleashing a shockwave. An explosive boom resounded as Orsted flew backward. I was also thrown away from the blast.

“Hmph...you nullified my Disturb Magic? No, that’s not it... You’re using multiple schools of magic simultaneously. Quite skilled to be able to do that voicelessly. Like this, was it?” The man snapped his fingers on his left hand. When he did, a small, square, fifty-centimeter window formed in the air. It was a beautiful window, adorned with gorgeous dragon-shaped ornaments. “Hm. More difficult than I expected.”

I ignored the window and focused on launching the fiercest fire attack against him that I could manage. What I pictured in my mind was an enormous flame. A mushroom cloud. A nuclear explosion. I channeled my magic as simply and straightforwardly as possible, as if powering up for a punch. I didn’t even think about the fact that Eris and Ruijerd might be caught up in it. I’d already lost the ability to think.

“Open, Front Wyrmgate!” As Orsted spat out the words, the window opened up.

In the same instant, the mana coalescing in my left hand was swallowed. The window frame cracked and splintered. An explosion was simultaneously triggered close to Orsted. It was far less powerful than I’d expected, and he easily avoided it.

“What incredible mana capacity. A Front Wyrmgate at this size couldn’t contain it. It’s almost as if you’re on the same level as Laplace... Well, you *are* the Man-God’s disciple, after all. Why have you still not healed your lungs? Are you trying to lull me into letting my guard down?”

That was right before my consciousness cut out completely. I didn’t have the ability to discern what was happening anymore.

The man was still observing me. Our eyes met. “Is that it?” In a split second, he closed in on me. There was nothing left I could do. “You can’t do anything besides magic?”

My magic was sealed, and my legs were frozen, so I couldn’t move. I was helpless in the face of his overwhelming murderous intent. In the edge of my vision, I could see the window pane dissipating, but there was nothing I could do.

“Guhugh!” I tried to use the roar I’d learned in the Doldia Village, the one that didn’t resemble theirs in the least. Orsted readied himself, but of course, all I was able to do was spit out blood to no effect.

“...Just mana? What are you trying to do?”

There was already nothing I *could* do. My magic was sealed, and nothing indicated I could beat him with physical attacks. The only thing I could do now was prostrate myself. But Orsted wouldn’t even allow me to do that. “Well, no matter. Die.”

“Aagh...!”

His hand speared right through my body at super-speed. Straight through my heart. An absolutely fatal wound. One my healing magic would never be effective on.

“How disappointing, Man-God. Now you’re using pawns that can’t even coat themselves in a Battle Aura? Just what

are you planning?" His hand was coated thickly in my blood when he extracted it. I tried to stand, but my body wouldn't listen. It betrayed me by crumbling to the ground. At the edge of my vision I could see Eris lifting her head, could see the stunned look on her face as she gazed over at me. Our eyes met.

"A-aah... R-Rudeu... Rudeus...!"

Ah, this sucks. I don't want to die. I still hadn't fulfilled my promise to Eris. Just two more years, I just wanted to hold on two more years. If I could do that, then I could die without reservations.

Let me just gather my mana. It's just one wound. I'll heal it, I told myself. I couldn't chant the words because there was a hole in my lungs. Still, I could do it. I just needed to slowly focus the mana. It would heal. It *would* heal. I couldn't die yet.

"Waaaaaaaaaaaaah!" Eris let out a wail.

"Was he important to you? I'm sorry, Eris Boreas Greyrat. But one day you will understand. Let's go, Nanahoshi."

"Y-yes..."

Orsted slowly walked away, the girl following along behind him.

Eris couldn't stand, either from the damage she took, or the fear. Or maybe the shock. All she could do was scream. She had no sword, so she used her voice.

"Ruijerd! Ghislaine! Grandfather! Father! Mother! Therese! Paul! I don't care who, just someone save him! Rudeus is going to die!"

Crap, my consciousness was fading further. Seriously? This was really the end?

But I didn't...want to...die...

"Hey, Orsted, there's just one thing that's weighing on me. That boy... Wouldn't it be better to just let him live?"

Just before my consciousness cut off completely, I felt like I heard someone say those words.

Chapter 10: The Wide, Gaping Hole in My Chest

Before I realized what was happening, I was in a completely white room. A completely white space where nothing existed.

Normally, this was the point where I started to feel disgusted. I would return to being that hideous thing I'd gotten used to for thirty-four years, and memories from my previous life would flash before me. Regret, conflict, vulgarity, and thoughts of entitlement. The memories I'd formed in the last twelve years would grow distant and dejection would well up. I would be consumed with the sense that I'd been caught in a long dream, and a sense of unease would fill my chest, as if chipping away at me.

This time, however, was different. The usual feelings of self-contempt didn't rise up. Instead, I experienced a sense of loss, as if I had a gaping hole in my chest. I looked down to find there was indeed a large opening there. *Ah, I knew it. I really did die...*

“Welp.”

The Man-God was standing there all of a sudden; I hadn't noticed him before. He had his usual irritating smile on his face, but for some reason, it didn't annoy me today. I wondered why. Maybe because of the hole that had opened up in my chest. Or maybe I'd decided earlier to stop being so hostile toward him.

“Well, what can I say, it's unfortunate.”

Yes, it really is unfortunate.

“You're different than usual. Are you okay? Not feeling good?”

As you can see, I've got a hole in my chest. Hey, do you mind if I ask you one thing?

“What is it?”

That guy, the one named Orsted. He attacked me the second he heard your name. Why's that?

“Because he's a terrible Dragon God. Despite how virtuous I am, he holds great enmity toward me.”

Virtuous, huh...? Well, you are an easy one to hold enmity toward. But if that were the case, shouldn't you have told me this beforehand? You can see all kinds of things, can't you? You knew that I was going to run into Orsted then, right? If you had at least said something to me about not mentioning you if Orsted asked, I would've—

“No, sorry. The truth is I can't see anything that has to do with the Dragon God. Not the future or the present. I had no idea you were going to run into him.”

Oh, so that's it... But why?

“He's got a curse on him that makes me unable to see him.”

Curse? So those actually do exist?

“Yes. You didn't have them in your world? Someone who was born possessing an unusual power thanks to an abnormality triggered by mana?”

We don't even have the concept of magic in the world I'm from. There were some who said they had the ability to sense the supernatural, but to be honest, they lacked any credibility.

“Aha, I see then. Well we have them here—Cursed Children we call them—odd ones. Orsted is one such example. Well, he's got about three other curses as well.”

So four, huh? That is pretty incredible. Oh yeah, I've actually heard about that. Blessed Children and Cursed Children, was it?

"Yeah, that's it. They're the same thing, actually. Humans just like binaries."

So that's it. So, what kind of curses does he have?

"Well, you saw how Ruijerd and Eris were terrified of him, right? That's one of his curses. Every living thing in this world either hates or fears him."

Everyone hates him? Well that's...kind of unpleasant. My spirit would break instantly if that were me. I understand how it feels to be hated.

"Hold on, you don't need to sympathize with him. He was born that way. He's an evil being who's trying to destroy the world."

Come on, don't say that. Anyone who was constantly surrounded by people who hated them would end up wanting to destroy the world. I had the same kind of thoughts in my previous life. I often grumbled about it on the Internet, saying how I wished everyone would just die.

"Hmm, you think so? I hate him, and I don't really care how he feels."

Hm? Does that mean you're affected by the curse, too? The fact that you can't see him is because of one of the curses placed on him? So he's got a curse that makes him be hated, a curse where you can't see him... What else?

"Who knows. I can't see him, so I don't know."

Okay... But if he's that dangerous, then it's all the more reason I wish you'd told me that someone like that existed.

"I never dreamed the two of you would ever meet. Walking about a world as vast as this one, the chances of

running into him would be..."

Like finding a needle in a haystack, right? Come to think of it, I actually didn't feel any hatred or fear toward him. Why is that?

"Isn't that because you came from another world?"

So those from another world aren't affected by the curse?

"That's what it looks like. The same thing happened when you met Ruijerd, right?"

...Huh? Hold up just a sec, what are you talking about? Is Ruijerd one of those Cursed Children, too?

"Nope, that's just the curse of Laplace's lance. Laplace also had a curse of fear on him, but he transferred it to his spear and passed it to the Superd tribe instead. He made their green hair the key to its effectiveness."

Curse? He passed it off...? Hey, what's going on? You knew about this from the beginning? You knew about it and that's why you made him help him? You made me waste my time and effort?

"No, don't get the wrong idea. The curse on the entire Superd tribe will gradually fade away with time. A bit of it remains with Ruijerd, but since he cut his hair, that immediately reduced its effectiveness."

Now that you mention it, Sylphie was bullied about her hair, but I didn't get the impression she was feared. That aside, why the hair? Because it's the source of their mana?

"Because Laplace's hair was also green."

Ahh, now I get it. There was something similar to that in my world, too. Using points of commonality and wordplay to put curses on people or remove them.

"At any rate, thanks to his involvement with you, his curse is fading. There's still a deep-rooted sense of discrimination that remains, but with time, and Ruijerd's own efforts, maybe he can do something to change that."

So it wasn't a total waste after all? I'm glad to hear that, then. I guess you do put some thought into your actions.

"Well, it'll be difficult for you to completely erase all the prejudice against the Superd."

It is a complicated matter, after all. Still, yeah... At any rate, that's great.

"Yes, great indeed. Looks like it was worth introducing the two of you to each other."

That's the reason you introduced us? If that's the case, shouldn't you have just told me that?

"You had no intention of listening to what I had to say at first, did you? I didn't get the chance."

...Well, guess that's true. I was pretty hostile when I turned you away. Can't deny that. That aside, even Ruijerd was easily bested by Orsted. I never imagined he'd be that easily defeated.

"Given his opponent, of course Ruijerd would lose."

Yeah, he is one of the Seven Great Powers, after all. How could you defeat him?

"You can't."

You can't? I guess there really is that great of a difference in ability?

"He's the strongest person in this world, even as restricted as he is by all of those curses."

The strongest? But the Dragon God is only second on the Seven Great Powers list! What about first?

“The Technique God is strong, too. But if Orsted actually went all-out, he’d be the victor. Orsted can use all of the skills and techniques that currently exist in this world, and on top of that, he can also use his own unique magic that’s specific to the Dragon God.”

All of the skills and techniques, huh? Sounds like a certain post-apocalyptic savior I know.

“Oh? You have someone like that in your world too?”

They can copy all of the techniques of every opponent they’ve ever fought. Although they’re plenty strong even without that ability. Enough to destroy their opponent with the tip of one finger.

“With just the tip of one finger? That is incredible. But so is Orsted. If he got serious, he could destroy this entire world.”

Just calling him strong seems a bit vague. How strong are we talking? Abnormally? Disastrously?

“Either way, he can’t unleash his real power thanks to a curse.”

So that’s the problem. Those curses sure are a pain. By the way, can I ask something?

“What is it?”

Just a second ago, you said you didn’t know about his curses, right? You said you didn’t know about them other than the one where he’s hated and the one where you can’t see anything to do with him, so why do you know that he can’t unleash his real power because of a curse?

“Uhh...”

It’s fine. This is the end, so let’s just get along. I won’t make a fuss, no matter what it is you’re hiding from me. I understand you cared about Ruijerd after all. And it was also thanks to you that Lilia and Aisha were saved. I’m not

going to quibble over these little lies you've told. No matter what your plans were for me in the future, they ended up being short-lived, anyway.

To be honest, there's a lot of other things I'd like to ask you, though. Such as why you introduced me to the Demon World's Greatest Emperor and stuff. Or where some of the other missing people are located. Or what your real objective even is in the first place. All things that are a bit too late to be asking now.

Well, what can I say? We're both failures, so let's be friends. Let's drop the formalities and have a blast together. We can dance naked, show our hidden talents, and of course, I don't mind if we draw faces on our bellies to talk to each other, either.

"The end?"

Yes, this is the end. I mean, isn't it? I died, after all.

"Oh, I see. You've lost all hope and given up...the complete opposite of how you were when we first met, no?"

Back then, I died without knowing what the heck was going on. This time, well, there's nothing I can do about it. Besides, I more or less knew that when I died, I'd wind up here. I have no idea where people go when they die, but I thought you'd come talk to me when it happened.

...Ah, looks like my consciousness here is fading. Looks like it's about time for us to part ways. I'm glad we were able to have a calm conversation here at the end, at least.

"So that's what this is about... Well, then I have good news for you."

Hm?

"You're not dead."

Before I knew what was happening, the hole in my chest had disappeared.

Suddenly my eyes snapped open. Eris was right there—right before my eyes. I was lying on the ground, looking up at her. The back of my head felt warm, and I soon realized it was because she was cradling my head in her lap. Her face was full of anxiety as she gazed down at me, as if she were looking at something she didn't want to see. But when I opened my eyes, relief shone visibly on her face. Her eyes were bright red. “R-Rudeus...you're awake?!”

“Yea—blegh!” I tried to talk, but instead blood came out.

“Rudeus!” Eris wrapped her arms around me.

“Ghhh...gack...!” I stopped coughing up blood, only to start choking violently.

Eris stroked my back. “Are you okay?”

I saw the look of confusion on her face and tilted my head. “Why am I...alive...?”

The wound in my chest had closed up completely. Well, the word “completely” might have been a little misleading. There was a gaping hole in the center of my robe, and beneath it a scar, as if someone had welded me shut. *Holy crap, this is weird*, I thought. My right hand didn't have an alien parasite attached to it, though.

“Just a moment ago when that girl said something, uh, Orsted or whatever his name was, used magic to heal you...” My question had been mostly rhetorical, but Eris incoherently fumbled out a response for me.

“Girl?”

“He called her Nanahoshi.”

Nanahoshi. That girl from before. Yes, I recalled that's what Orsted called her. But hold on, Nanahoshi...? I felt like I'd heard that somewhere before. Sometime in the last year, no less. Where was it, though? I couldn't recall.

"So he went out of his way to heal the person he'd just killed...?"

What was he thinking? I was sure he'd pierced my heart. Severe damage to an internal organ couldn't be fixed with Intermediate healing magic. That meant he must have used Advanced-tier magic, or something even more powerful. Orsted must have possessed healing magic of such power that it could instantly save someone who had sustained a fatal injury. It seemed the Man-God hadn't quite been lying when he said that Orsted could use any skill or technique in the world.

"I was utterly defeated."

Even if he was on a completely different level from me, it was still an accurate statement. He ranked second among the world's Seven Great Powers. According to the Man-God, he was actually *the* strongest. Clearly, the title wasn't just for show.

"What about Ruijerd?"

"He hasn't woken up yet."

Upon further inspection, I realized Ruijerd was sleeping on the edge of the road. The carriage had also been pulled aside, and a fire was crackling. Had Eris done all of that by herself?

"This is the first time I've seen Ruijerd lying on his side like that," I said.

"Rudeus, you shouldn't talk yet. You were just choking up blood."

"I'm fine now. Those were just dregs still left in my throat," I said, even as my head remained in her lap. I didn't want to move. I was going to stay here forever.

I wondered what would happen if I flipped over and turned my face in a certain direction. In fact, that was the only thing I was thinking about. This was most likely part of humanity's innate survival instinct. When faced with death, people wanted to leave behind offspring, after all. Ah well, whatever. Let's not overthink complex matters. Let's just dive in.

"Being alive is a wonderful thing," I said as I spun my body around and wrapped my arms around Eris' waist. I took a long, deep breath and her scent filled my nose.

"Rudeus...you're awfully enthusiastic."

"Hmm, I feel kind of like...everything just seems to be overflowing." More than usual, anyway. No doubt because of that man, Orsted. Or because I'd had that dream with the Man-God. I'm repeating myself here, but there was no doubt that I'd felt unusually energetic since I woke up.

"Then I'm fine to hit you, right?" There was a tremor in Eris' voice as it floated toward me. An angry one, by the sound of it. Oh well, not like I could blame her. She'd been so worried for me, and I'd taken the opportunity to sexually harass her. I'd be pissed off in her position, too.

"Sure, go ahead."

She punched me. *Thud*.

Then she pulled me toward her chest and wrapped her arms tightly around my head. Her chest was soft against my cheek. I could hear the pounding of her heart deep within, and from above came the faint sound of her sobs. She was quietly crying. "Thank God..." she whispered.

I languidly reached up and patted her back.

Chapter 11: Journey's End

The three of us finally arrived in the Asura Kingdom three days later. It was right before us...or rather, we were right in it. Despite that, the events of the previous day still weighed us down, leaving glum looks on our faces.

We'd been utterly defeated. We'd been wiped out so abruptly, and I'd even had my life taken from me. Orsted had resuscitated me on some strange whim, but if not for that, I wouldn't even be here. That hadn't quite sunk in yet.

It was true that I'd thought I didn't want to die when he landed his final blow. You'd expect me to be traumatized, and yet, when I opened my eyes, I felt refreshed. Well, that was a bit of an exaggeration. It was more like, *oh, it was just a dream?* It was the same feeling I got when I woke up from a nightmare. Perhaps because I'd seen the Man-God right as I was dying and so the whole thing felt surreal.

Put like that, it seemed the Man-God must have guessed what was going on and forced himself into my consciousness. To be honest, on an instinctive level, I wanted nothing more than to turn him away, but the Man-God *did* care about Ruijerd and his affairs, so maybe the god wasn't actually that bad.

That aside, ever since I nearly died, Eris has been sticking really close to me while we were inside the carriage. Before, she'd just stand diagonally across from me and say, "I'm doing balancing training. Why don't you give it a try?" But lately, she'd started sitting down. Specifically, right beside me. Close enough for our thighs to touch. Yesterday there was skin peeking out from the hem of her pants. It's only human instinct to want to touch something you can

see, so I reached out with my right hand, just a bit, and stroked it. In return Eris just glared at me, her face bright red.

She didn't punch me. Eris, the one who was always punching people, had suddenly stopped. Even when I did something that I totally deserved to be punched for, she didn't. Her face would flush and she'd just glower at me instead. And she'd just keep doing that, staring me down. Not just that, but she'd keep sitting right next to me. In the past, she'd move away when I did things like that, but now, she remained close.

To be completely honest, it was getting to the point where I wanted to thrust my hand into her pants next, so I wished she would put some distance between us. I knew there were some things you could pass off with a laugh and some things you couldn't. I was holding myself back. But whether she knew of my internal conflict or not, Eris stayed close to me all the same.

If I left my hands unoccupied, they would wander off in Eris' direction, so currently I was creating magic with my left hand and using my right to disturb the mana flowing out of it. This was the magic that Orsted had used. I believe he'd called it "Disturb Magic." Just before the mana could take shape as it gathered in my hand, I used different mana to disrupt and disperse it.

It was simple and didn't cost much mana, yet it was an incredible technique. In retrospect, this method of nullification was similar to the King-tier barrier I'd gotten trapped in back in the Shirone Kingdom. It was simple to explain, but actually performing it was quite difficult. Perhaps because I was using my non-dominant hand to conjure with, for the most part the magic still took shape, albeit imperfectly. It was extremely difficult to completely nullify it the way Orsted had done. But it could still be used

as a restraint, even in its imperfection. He'd actually taught me something pretty useful.

"Hey, Rudeus, what have you been doing this whole time?"

"I'm trying to mimic the magic that Orsted used," I said.

Eris stared intently at my hands. In my left, I'd crafted a small, misshapen stone cannon that fell to the floor with a small *thud*.

Another failure. I almost felt like I was playing rock-paper-scissors with my hands. No matter how I tried, I kept letting my left hand win. Hm. This wasn't going to work if I was being sloppy about it. In other words, there were some rules involved in disrupting magic. Did that mean that if I could unleash magic in accordance with those rules, I could actually nullify his Disturb Magic? The possibilities were growing.

"What kind of magic is it?"

"The kind that nullifies magic," I answered.

"You can do that?"

"I'm practicing it right now."

"Why are you doing something like that?" Eris asked.

"There's been a number of times lately that I've had my magic sealed and couldn't do anything. I guess you could say I'm researching. At the very least, if we ever meet Orsted again and it turns into a fight, I want to be able to get away from him. Make sense?"

Eris went quiet. For a short time, the only sound was of stone cannons thudding against the floor.

"Hey, Rudeus, how come you're so strong?"

Was I really strong? “I think you’re stronger than I am,” I told her.

“That’s not true at all.”

“...”

“...”

The conversation died out. Eris looked like she had something she wanted to ask, but said nothing. I wondered what was on her mind, but I hadn’t the faintest idea. No, that wasn’t entirely true.

“Are you worried about the fact that you were so easily defeated the other day?”

“...Yeah,” said Eris.

It wasn’t her fault. According to the Man-God, Orsted was the Dragon God, the strongest being in this world. He’d even easily dispensed with Ruijerd. It wasn’t a fair fight. He existed on a plane you couldn’t reach through effort alone. In my previous life, I’d put in a lot of effort in some areas and managed to scale some heights, but I’d never once ranked among the very top in anything. Even with the games I was engrossed in, where I thought there was no way I’d lose, there were always people better than I was.

Orsted had curses restricting him, and despite that, his physical fighting ability surpassed Ruijerd’s. He’d defeated Eris with one hand and rendered me completely powerless. On top of that, he fought in such a precise way that he exerted no more effort than necessary to take you from full HP to zero, which meant he still had energy to spare. I had no idea how strong he would really be if he went all-out.

“He’s an unfair opponent to have. It’s not your fault.”

“But...”

I could understand why Eris was troubled. She’d been done in by one attack. He’d taken her sword attack straight-

on and sent her flying.

"You're still young. As long as you work hard, you'll get stronger," I assured her.

"You really think so...?"

"Yeah, even Ghislaine and Ruijerd said the same thing, didn't they?"

Eris suddenly lifted her head and looked straight at me. "You know you almost died, right? Why are you... How can you say that so easily?"

Well, because it felt surreal to me. I wasn't thinking about trying to fight him in the future, either. The next time I saw his face, I was going to jet off like a rocket. Or maybe hide in the shadows like a rat. If I couldn't find a way to run, maybe I'd beg him to spare my life. I prayed that wasn't a sight that Eris had to see.

"Because I don't want to die next time," I said finally.

"True, you don't want to die, do you...?"

"Please don't worry. I'm going to work hard, so that if we ever wind up in another dangerous situation like that, I'll be able to pick you up and make a run for it."

Eris had a complicated look on her face as she leaned her head against my shoulder. I might have gained more affection points with her if I'd used the opportunity to reach over and stroke her head, but I was in the middle of casting Disturb Magic with my right hand.

"Well, no matter what happens, we've got to get a little stronger."

Just a little bit more. There was no way we were going to become the strongest in this world. The ceiling here was way too high. But I wanted to at least get strong enough that we could get away if we were attacked by some weirdo.

As I thought that, I pressed my face into Eris' hair and inhaled her scent.

Once night fell and Eris was asleep, I spoke to Ruijerd. We'd spoken even less than usual since that incident. Ruijerd wasn't much of a chatterbox to begin with, but since then he'd become morosely quiet. He probably blamed himself for what happened because, despite his promise to deliver us safely home, he hadn't been able to protect us. But at least I was still alive, regardless of how much luck played a part in that.

"That man, Orsted—he's apparently the Dragon God," I told him. "Number two of the Seven Great Powers." I opened the conversation with that remark, starting on the idea that since our opponent was too strong, it was only natural that we lost.

"So that's who he was. No wonder he was so..."

"Strong, right? After you were knocked out, there was nothing I could do to oppose him."

"This is the first time since Laplace that I took just one glance at someone and felt like I couldn't defeat them."

Ruijerd didn't know about the curses restricting Orsted's power. He didn't know he'd been beaten in physical combat by an opponent that was holding back. If he knew the truth, it might shock him.

"Even I don't think I can stand against the elite of the Seven Great Powers. Those people are monsters beyond comprehension. It was bad luck that we ran into someone like that on the road. It can only be considered good luck that we managed to survive." The words made it sound like he was making excuses, but it also felt like there was a tinge of self-reproach in Ruijerd's tone. Perhaps he acknowledged

that there was nothing he could do, but saw that as a separate matter from him being unable to fulfill his duty.

"Rudeus," he continued. "If we ever meet someone like that again, you absolutely must not pick a fight with them. Don't even meet their eyes. If you don't want things to happen again like they did this time, that is."

"Y-yeah. Well, next time I'll probably just avert my eyes and move on."

He was angry with me. Well, if I hadn't called out to Orsted we probably would've just passed each other by. I would admit to that mistake. Although he didn't look that dangerous at first. No...after Ruijerd and Eris reacted the way they did toward him, I should have been more cautious.

"So then, what's bothering you?" I asked.

Ruijerd cast a sharp glare at me. "Who is the 'Man-God'?"

Oh. So that's what this was about.

"At first, it seemed he intended to let us go. Despite the bloodthirsty aura radiating off of him, there was actually nothing murderous in his eyes. But the moment he heard the name 'Man-God' he turned all of that animosity toward you."

I closed my eyes. Should I tell him or not? It was a decision I thought I'd already made before. But as unsavory as he looked, the Man-God wasn't that bad a person, and after what had happened to us, I didn't like keeping things hidden.

"Actually, the Man-God is..."

Despite how long I'd mulled over whether to tell Ruijerd or not, once I made my decision the words came right out, slipping past my lips. I told him how, since the time of the Displacement Incident, a mysterious being who called

himself the Man-God had occasionally appeared in my dreams. That he'd advised me to help Ruijerd; that he'd given me advice at other times as well. That my suspicious behavior was because I was following that advice. Then I told him how it seemed that the Man-God and Dragon God were enemies. I told him that my conversations with the Man-God were vague and I was probably forgetting a lot of details, but I narrated it all as broadly as I could.

"The Man-God and the Dragon God...the Seven Gods of old... It's all so sudden, it's hard to believe," said Ruijerd.

"I bet."

"But there are parts that make sense." After he said that, Ruijerd went silent. The air was dominated by the crackling sound of the fire as it burned. The shadows it created danced around, etching themselves upon the face of one old warrior. Thanks to his genetics, Ruijerd looked quite young, but there was something in his expression that hinted at a battle-torn history.

Suddenly I remembered that, in my last dream, the Man-God and I had talked a bit about Ruijerd's curse. "By the way, Mister Ruijerd. About the bad reputation of the Superd tribe...apparently, that's a curse."

"...What?"

"To be precise, it was a curse placed on Laplace, which he transferred to your spears, which then rubbed off onto the entire Superd tribe. Or so the Man-God said."

"I see...so it's a curse..." I'd shared that info with him thinking it would be good news, but Ruijerd just scowled and fell into thought. "I've never heard of transferring a curse before, but if it's Laplace we're talking about, it's possible. He was able to do anything."

I didn't know much about curses, so Ruijerd was probably more knowledgeable about them than me. He

seemed to consider it a while longer, but in the end, he just let out a weak laugh. “If it’s a curse, then there’s no way to fix it.”

“There isn’t?” I asked.

“No. They’re called curses because there’s no way to lift them. I’ve never heard of a curse that affects an entire tribe before, but...if that’s what a god said, then it’s probably true.”

He let out a laugh of self-derision, as if to say everything he’d done up until now had been for naught. It might have been just the lighting, but it seemed like there were tears at the edges of his eyes.

“But...” I started.

“What is it?”

“The Man-God said that unlike ordinary curses, this one is fading as time passes.”

“What?”

“He also said that it still remains in you, Mister Ruijerd, but you’ve severely reduced it by cutting your hair.”

“Are you serious?!”

He shouted it so suddenly that Eris rolled over in her sleep, mumbling, “Mm...” This was probably a conversation I should have had with her as well, but... Oh well, I could do it again when she woke up.

“Yeah. He said that right now what remains is just traces of the curse and the initial prejudices that it created. The Superd tribe’s reputation can recover slowly but surely, depending on how hard you work from here on out.”

“I see...that makes sense...”

“But that’s just what the Man-God said,” I added. “Even if you trust what he says, it might be best to take it with a

grain of salt. We should continue to be as cautious as we've been so far."

"I know. Still, hearing that was enough for me." Ruijerd went silent again. It wasn't just the lighting that was making it appear that way anymore. He had tears streaming down his face.

"Well then, it's about time I got to bed."

"Yeah."

I pretended not to see his tears. Our Ruijerd was a reliable warrior and a strong man who didn't cry.

A month passed after that. We didn't visit the capital, but just followed a narrow route farther and farther north. We passed through many small farming villages, and saw wheat fields spread out before us and watermills off to the side as we continued on our way.

We didn't gather information. We just headed north with as much speed as we could muster. We figured we'd catch up on everything once we reached the refugee camp, but even more importantly, we were almost there already. We just wanted to reach our destination as quickly as possible.

Finally, we arrived in the Fittoa Region, which was now empty. Even in places where there had once been traces of civilization, there was now nothing at all. There were no wheat fields, no fields of Vatirus flowers, no watermills, no livestock buildings. Grass was all that spread out before us—a field of it that stretched far and wide. The scene created a sense of emptiness, one that we cradled deep inside us as

we arrived at the current (and only) city in the Fittoa Region: the refugee camp. Our final destination.

It was just before we reached the entrance that Ruijerd stopped the carriage.

“Hm? What’s wrong?”

Ruijerd descended from the driver’s seat. I looked around, thinking perhaps some monster had appeared, but saw no enemies. Ruijerd came to the back of the carriage and said, “This is where I take my leave.”

“What?” I raised my voice in shock at his sudden declaration.

Eris’ eyes also went wide. “W-wait just a second!”

We nearly toppled out of the carriage as we stood to face Ruijerd. This was too fast. We’d just arrived at the refugee camp. No, we were just a step away. “Can’t you at least rest a day—no, just walk into the town with us, at least?”

“Yeah, I mean—” Eris started.

“Unnecessary.” Ruijerd’s words were curt as he looked at us. “The two of you are both warriors now. You don’t need my protection.”

Eris went quiet when he said that. To be honest, I’d actually forgotten that the only reason Ruijerd had stuck with us this long was to see us back to our home, and that once we’d arrived there, we’d be saying goodbye. I thought we’d always be together.

“Mister Ruijerd...” I started, then hesitated. If I tried to stop him, would he stay with us? In retrospect, I’d caused him enormous trouble. It was true that he’d brought his share of problems with him, but I’d shown him far more of my pathetic weaknesses. Despite that, here he was

acknowledging me as a warrior. I couldn't ask any more of him.

"If you hadn't been with us," I said, "I'm sure we wouldn't have made it this far in three years."

"No, I'm sure you could have done it."

"That's not true. I'm too careless about some things, so we would have fallen afoul of something along the way, I think."

"As long as you're able to recognize that, you're fine."

There were numerous occasions on which I found myself at my wits' end, such as when I was taken captive in Shirone. If Ruijerd hadn't been with us, I would have probably panicked even further.

"...Rudeus, I told you this before." Ruijerd's face was even more calm than usual. "As a magician, you've already attained a kind of perfection. Despite all the talent you possess, you still don't let it get to your head. You should be aware of how much it means to be able to do that at your age."

I felt conflicted about the meaning of those words. Even if he called me young, my actual age was over forty. The reason I hadn't let things go to my head was because I still retained those memories. Although forty was probably still considered young as far as Ruijerd was concerned.

"I..." I paused as I started to speak. I could've rattled off a list of my weaknesses right there, but that seemed far too pathetic. I wanted to stand before this man with my head held high. "No, I understand. Mister Ruijerd, thank you for all you've done for us so far," I said. I started to bow, only for him to grab me and stop me.

"Rudeus, don't bow to me."

"Why not...?" I asked.

“You may think that I’ve done a lot for you, but I think you’ve done a lot for me. Thanks to you, I see hope that my tribe can regain its honor once more.”

“I didn’t do anything. I basically wasn’t *able* to do anything.”

I’d tried to turn the name “Dead End” into something positive on the Demon Continent, but we were never anything more than a group of adventurers while we were there. In the Millis Continent, that name just didn’t carry the same weight. I’d meant to come up with a new strategy, but it just kept getting pushed back, and then we’d come to the Central Continent and I wasn’t able to do anything else to help him. I liked to think everything we’d done had some impact, but I couldn’t erase the sizeable history of oppression in the world, and I couldn’t do anything about the prejudices people held toward the Superd tribe.

“No, you did a lot. You taught me that my straightforward method of saving children wasn’t the only one out there.”

“But none of my methods were very effective,” I countered.

“Still, I’ve changed. I remember all of it. The words of that old woman in Rikarisu City who, thanks to your schemes, said she didn’t find the Superd tribe scary. The looks on those adventurers’ faces when they heard the name ‘Dead End’—how they weren’t frightened, but rather laughed cheerfully. The closeness I felt to the warriors of the Doldia tribe and how they accepted me even after I told them I was a Superd. And the Shirone soldiers, and how they cried as they thanked me when they were reunited with their families.”

The first two aside, the rest happened through Ruijerd’s own efforts. I hadn’t done anything. “Those were things you

did by yourself," I told him.

"No. I couldn't do anything by myself. In the four hundred years since the war I worked alone, unable to take a single step forward. The one who showed me that step was you, Rudeus."

"But that really happened because of the Man-God's advice."

"I don't care about some god I've never seen. The person who really helped me was you. No matter what you think, I feel a debt of gratitude toward you. That's why I don't want you to lower your head to me. The two of us are equals. If you want to thank me, look me in the eyes," Ruijerd said as he stretched an arm out toward me.

I looked him in the eyes as I reached out and gripped his hand in mine.

"I'll say it again. Thank you, Rudeus, for all you did for me."

"And the same to you. Thank you for everything you did for us."

When I squeezed his hand, I felt the strength coming from him. The corners of my eyes started to sting. Ruijerd had accepted someone like me—someone who was pathetic, who'd failed the entire way.

After a few moments, he pulled his hand away, and rested it on top of Eris' head. "Eris," he said.

". . . What?"

"Can I treat you as a child this one last time?"

"Fine, whatever," she answered curtly.

There was a faint smile on Ruijerd's face as he stroked her head. "Eris, you have talent. Enough to become far, far stronger than me."

"Liar. After all, I lost to..." Her mouth curled downward into a pout.

Ruijerd chuckled and said the same words he'd always used when they practiced. "You survived an attack in battle from a man who bears the name of a god. You..."

Understand what that means, right?

She glared at him sharply. Then at last her eyes widened with realization. "...I understand."

"Good girl." Ruijerd patted her on the head before dropping his hand.

Eris kept the tight frown on her face and balled her hands into fists. It looked like she was trying her best to hold in her tears. I turned my gaze away from her and asked Ruijerd, "What are you going to do after this?"

"I don't know. For now, I intend to look for any remnants of the Superd tribe on the Central Continent. Restoring honor to my tribe is just a dream within a dream if I'm all by myself."

"All right then. Good luck. If I have any free time, I'll see if I can do something to help out, too."

"...Heh. And if I have any free time, I'll see about looking for your mother," Ruijerd said as he turned away. He didn't need to prepare for his journey. He could make his way even if he set out with just the clothes on his back.

Yet he suddenly stopped and turned back. "That reminds me, I need to return this." Ruijerd removed the pendant that was hanging from around his neck. It was the Migurd tribe pendant I'd received from Roxy. It was the only item that tied Roxy and me together...at least, it had been.

"Please keep that with you," I told him.

"Are you sure? Isn't it important to you?"

"That's exactly why I want you to keep it."

When I said that, he nodded. It seemed he was willing to take it. "All right then, Rudeus, Eris...let's meet again," Ruijerd said as he left the two of us.

We'd spent so much time talking about things when he first said he'd come with us in the beginning, and yet now, as he was leaving, everything seemed to be happening in an instant. There was so much I wanted to say to him. So many things had happened, from the time we met on the Demon Continent until we reached the Asura Kingdom. So many feelings that words couldn't even describe. Like not wanting to say goodbye to our companion.

"Let's meet again."

All those feelings were wrapped up in those few words as his silhouette receded into the distance. *That's right—we just have to meet again*, I told myself. We surely would. As long as we were still alive, we'd definitely meet again.

Eris and I watched Ruijerd go, in silence and with gratitude for everything he'd done for us up until now, until he faded away completely.

That was how our journey reached its conclusion.



Chapter 12: **The Reality of the Calamity**

The refugee camp was quiet, and the size of a village. If this were the Demon Continent, it would be just large enough to be considered a city, but it had no life to it. Silence permeated the air, and the camp's occupants were few relative to its size. I could sense people within the hurriedly constructed log houses, so the place was definitely inhabited, but there was no spirit left in its residents.

I headed into the middle of the refugee camp, where a building that resembled an Adventurers' Guild stood. This was the headquarters of the refugee camp, according to the note that was written on the entrance. When I went in, I found it was just as melancholy.

I had a bad feeling about this.

"Rudeus, that's..." Eris pointed at a sheet of paper. At the very top of the page was the name "Fittoa Liege Lord James Boreas Greyrat," and beside it, "*Seeking Status Information, Deceased or Missing.*" Beneath that were the names of those who'd gone missing after the incident, listed alphabetically by village and city.

"Let's look at that later," I said.

"Yeah."

The list of the deceased was incredibly long. Also, the Liege Lord named at the head of the document wasn't Sauros. Both of those things made me anxious as we headed deeper within the building.

When we gave Eris' name at the counter, the middle-aged woman attending it quickly slipped into the back. Then she returned, happily, with a man and woman in tow. Their faces were familiar. One of them was bearded and white-haired, wearing an outfit that looked slightly finer than that of an ordinary townsperson. It was Alphonse, the household butler. The other had chocolate-colored skin and was wearing a swordsman's outfit.

"Ghislaine!" Eris had a look of pure joy on her face as she raced over to the woman. If she had a tail, it would be wagging.

I was happy, too. I hadn't heard any news of Ghislaine this whole time, but she looked well. Perhaps the reason Paul hadn't heard anything about her was just a gap in the information stream.

Ghislaine looked at Eris' face and broke into a wide grin. "Eris, no, Lady Eris, I'm glad you made it safely—"

"...It's fine, you can just call me Eris."

Ghislaine looked happy for a moment, but soon enough, her expression clouded over. Even Alphonse was gazing at her sympathetically. *It can't be...* I thought as a sense of unease welled up within me.

"Eris...let's talk further in." Ghislaine's voice was hard. Her tail was standing straight up. Her expression wasn't that of someone who was simply happy at Eris' return. She was nervous.

"Yeah, okay." Eris saw the look on Ghislaine's face and seemed to understand. She followed Ghislaine deeper into the building.

When I tried to follow them, Alphonse stopped me and said, "Master Rudeus, please wait outside."

“Huh? Oh, okay.” It made sense, I guessed. I was honestly just hired help, so perhaps I wasn’t allowed to listen in on important conversations.

“No, Rudeus will come too,” Eris said in a strident tone, one that would brook no dissent.

“If that is what you wish, Lady Eris.”

Eris’ lips were pulled together even tighter than usual, her hands curled so hard at her sides they were turning white.

We silently passed through a short hallway and entered what looked like a workroom. There was a sofa in the middle, and a vase at the edge of the room which contained a Vatirus flower. The far end of the room was furnished plainly and contained only a cheap-looking work desk.

Eris didn’t wait for an invitation before taking her seat on the sofa. She grasped my hand and dragged me along to sit beside her. Ghislaine, as usual, took up her position at the edge of the room. Alphonse stood in front of Eris and bowed to her in the traditional way of a butler.

“Welcome home, Lady Eris. I received word earlier you would be making your way here and waited patiently for your—”

“Cut the courtesies and just say it. Who died?” Eris interjected. She asked the question outright, without any padding to cushion the harshness of the words. She sat straight-backed, with strength in her gaze, but I knew there was anxiety swirling in her heart. Mostly because she was squeezing my hand so tightly.

“About that...” Alphonse’s response was evasive.

Judging by his manner, Sauros was likely dead. Eris was a grandpa’s girl. She mimicked every single one of his

mannerisms. If he was dead, it would hurt her greatly.

Alphonse forced the words out with great effort. "Lord Sauros, Lord Philip, and Lady Hilda... All three of them are deceased."

The second we heard those words, her fingers crushed my hand. Pain shot up my arm, but it was Alphonse's words, rather than the pain, that left me dazed. It had to be a mistake, right? It hadn't been that long. It hadn't even been three years yet. Or perhaps it'd be more correct to say it would soon be three *whole* years.

"There's...no mistake about that, right?" There was a tremor in Eris' voice when she asked the question.

Alphonse nodded. "Lord Philip and Lady Hilda were teleported together and passed away in the Conflict Zone. Ghislaine confirmed this."

Ghislaine bobbed her head.

"That's right... Where was Ghislaine teleported to?"

"The same place as Lord Philip. The Conflict Zone." Ghislaine said succinctly.

As she was pushing through the Conflict Zone on foot, she'd happened upon Philip and Hilda's bodies. That was all she said. She didn't explain what condition their remains were in or how exactly she'd found them, but judging by the look on her face, it was bad. Was it the condition of the bodies or the way in which they died? Or had she seen something that made her want to turn away? Had she heard something that made her want to cover her ears?

Eris just made a single humming sound, but her hand was trembling as it gripped mine. "And what about my grandfather?"

"...He was forced to take responsibility for Fittoa's Displacement Incident, and was executed."

"That's absurd," I blurted out without thinking. "What meaning would there be in executing Lord Sauros?"

He was forced to take responsibility for a natural disaster, and executed? That was ridiculous. There was nothing he could've done about it. Or did they expect him to stop it before it happened? It had happened suddenly and without forewarning. What responsibility was there to be had?

"Rudeus, sit."

"..."

Eris tugged at my hand and forced me back into my seat. Apparently, at some point, I'd stood up. There were feelings pooling around inside my head that I couldn't express in words. Perhaps it was the extreme pain that made them incoherent. My hand hurt.

No. In truth, I understood. Even if there was no forewarning, even if it couldn't have been prevented, people had died. Fields and crops had disappeared. The losses were immeasurable. The people were steeped in discontent and they needed a scapegoat. Even in my previous life in Japan, the Prime Minister would take responsibility by immediately resigning if something shameful happened.

By dying, Sauros had taken the people's discontent with him. Someone capable could take his place. At least then, people might find some relief.

It wasn't just that, though. I was sure that some power struggle between the nobles was involved. I had no idea just how much the old man Sauros had possessed in terms of authority, but it must've been enough for his downfall to warrant being killed.

I could rationalize it. I *could*. But then, that just brought us to our current situation. To a refugee camp blanketed in silence. To a practically deserted headquarters. There were

no signs that the country was serious about reestablishing the Fittoa Region. If Sauros were still alive, perhaps he would've taken more active measures. That old man was useful precisely in these kinds of situations.

But no—that was only a front. Eris' feelings were what I cared about. I couldn't stay calm when I thought about how she must be feeling to hear she had no family left. I had no idea when Philip and Hilda's deaths were reported. It could have been before or after Sauros' death. But Sauros at least *had* been alive—“had” being the keyword. There'd been no need to kill him.

Just how many did they think had died in this disaster—in the Displacement Incident? Hundreds of thousands, an uncountable number, and yet they purposefully killed a man who had returned alive? Eris had come all this way to return home just to learn that?

Ah, crap. I couldn't think straight. My hand hurt.

“Master Rudeus, I understand how you feel, but...this is the current state of the Asura Kingdom.”

Alphonse, the master you served was killed! Ghislaine, the man who saved your life was killed! I thought. Those were the things I wanted to say to them.

Yet...nothing came out.

Mostly because Eris didn't say anything. There was no point in me shouting and crying. Even though they'd taken care of me, and we were related, Sauros had still been a stranger to me. If his family wasn't going to say anything, what point was there in me complaining?

“...So, what am I supposed to do?” In an uncharacteristic show of quietness, Eris neither lashed out nor yelled.

“Lord Pilemon Notos Greyrat has said he would welcome you as his concubine, Lady Eris.”

Even I could feel the murderous intent suddenly pouring out of Ghislaine. “Alphonse, you bastard! Do you seriously intend for her to take that offer?!” she howled at him, so viciously I thought she might split my eardrums open. “I’m sure you remember what he said!”

Alphonse retained his cool even in the face of Ghislaine’s fury. “Even so, if we’re to think of the future of the Fittoa Region, a bit of discomfort is—”

“As if she could ever be happy being married to a man like that!”

“He’s filth, but he has a distinguished family name. There are many undesired marriages that result in happiness,” Alphonse said.

“I don’t care how many! Are you even thinking about Eris at all?!”

“I’m thinking about the Boreas family and the Fittoa Region.”

“So you plan to sacrifice Eris for that?!” Ghislaine barked back.

“If it’s necessary.”

I watched in mute amazement as the two of them suddenly broke into an argument. Eris stood before I realized what was happening. She let go of my hand and folded both arms over her chest, her legs spread wide beneath her and her chin tilted forward.

“Enough!”

Her voice was loud enough that Ghislaine had to cover her ears. This was the full extent of Eris’ bellow—one I hadn’t heard lately. However, that was all the energy she seemed to have.

"Just...leave me by myself. I want to think." The two of them looked shocked when they heard how disheartened her voice sounded.

Alphonse was the first to leave. Ghislaine looked reluctant as she gazed over at Eris, but left.

Then it was just me.

"Eris...um..."

"Rudeus, did you not hear me? Leave me alone for now." Her tone left no room for argument.

I felt a bit shocked. This was probably the first time in a few years that Eris had pushed me away like this.

"Okay, I...understand." My shoulders drooped as I watched Eris turn her back toward me. The second I left the room and closed the doors, I swore I could hear a sob.

Alphonse had prepared rooms for us. There were four of them, narrow and located in a house near the headquarters, probably intended for the refugees. I carried my luggage into one of them and stowed Eris' in the room neighboring mine. I changed out of my travel clothes and into ones for going around town. I discarded my misshapen, patched-up robe on the bed and left the room.

I returned to the headquarters. I wanted to try talking to Alphonse and Ghislaine some more, but I didn't see them. I didn't have the willpower to search for them, so I gazed at the notice board instead. Paul's message was pinned there, the one I'd seen numerous times in the past few months. *Search the Central Continent or the northern region*, it said. Written when I was still about, what, ten years of age? I'd soon be thirteen. Time sure had passed quickly.

My eyes scanned over the list of dead and missing. They landed on the section titled “Buena Village.” The names of people I knew were listed in a row on the missing persons’ list. Over half had a line slashed through them. A glimpse at the column of the dead revealed that the same names had been written over there. Apparently, as their deaths had been confirmed, their names were crossed out and they were added to the list of dead. There were slightly more names in the missing column than the dead, but the list of dead were densely packed together.

I saw Laws’ name written in the missing persons’ column with a line run through it, and my brows furrowed. I’d heard from Paul that Laws was dead. I hadn’t heard the details of how he died, though.

Then, just below that, I saw it. There, in the missing persons’ column, was Sylphie’s name. And a line was drawn through it.

Ba-thump. My heart drummed loudly.

It can’t be, I thought as I looked at the column of the dead. I didn’t see her name near Laws’. I started at the top and scanned down to the end, but her name wasn’t there at all.

“Um, this, there’s a line drawn through this name, but it’s not in the list of the dead...?” I asked one of the staff, voicing my doubt.

“Yes, that’s one of the people who was confirmed to be a survivor.”

When I heard those words, something inside my chest dropped with a thud. It was like my heart had fallen straight through my stomach and right through my guts. That’s how relieved I felt at the revelation that Sylphie was alive.

“Then do you also know how to contact them?” I asked.

“If that person hasn’t come to our headquarters here themselves, then I’m afraid not.”

“Could you check for me? The name is Sylphiette.”

“Please wait just a moment.”

It took some twenty minutes or so as the staff searched.

“I’m sorry, but her contact information hasn’t been registered with us.”

“Oh, All right...”

There were two possibilities, then. Either she hadn’t settled down yet and so she had no contact information to list, or someone else had spotted her and updated the list, so her contact information hadn’t been recorded. There was the possibility that there’d been some mistake, but I didn’t think that was it. There was an extremely high possibility that Sylphie had survived. For the moment, I should just be happy about that.

Of course, I was worried, too. About her hair color, for instance. It was a slightly different shade than that of the Superd’s, but it was still the same general color. According to the Man-God, the curse was one that applied only to the Superd tribe. Still, there were many cruel people out there in the world. She might be out there somewhere, crying because of a comment made about her hair...

No. Paul had said that she could use healing magic without the need for incantations. That meant she had enough strength to survive on her own. Perhaps she was just like me, working as an adventurer. Perhaps she was searching for her family, unaware that they’d already passed away. In fact, if she’d survived the incident, that was probably the most likely possibility. I just prayed she hadn’t become a slave or anything.

For the moment, I took it upon myself to cross Lilia's and Aisha's names off the missing list. There was already a line through my name. They had heard that Eris was on her way here, so they probably knew about me as well.

Among Paul's family, the only name that remained was Zenith Greyrat, meaning she still hadn't been found, after all. Perhaps I'd ask the Man-God the next time he appeared in my dreams.

When I finished looking over the bulletin board, Eris still hadn't come out of the room. She was normally so quick to recover. This was the first time I'd seen her this troubled over something. But we'd journeyed so far to get here, and now that she'd arrived home, there was no family or warm house to welcome her. Perhaps that was enough to overwhelm even someone as strong as Eris.

Maybe I should go back and comfort her after all, I thought. No, let's wait a little bit longer.

I decided to return to the building where I'd left our luggage. I figured I'd find something to preoccupy myself, though I didn't have any ideas as to what. Perhaps I'd just rest a little instead.

Alphonse called to me as I moved to leave. He brought me to a room located in the refugee camp's headquarters and took a seat in front of me. To my right sat Ghislaine. The only reason the two of them were sitting was probably because Eris wasn't with us. Unlike me, they seemed to understand the master/servant hierarchy.

"Now then, Master Rudeus, please provide a concise report."

"A report?"

"Yes, as to what you have been doing these past three years."

"Oh, yeah, all right."

I told him how we'd been transported to the Demon Continent and met Ruijerd. How we registered as adventurers and used that to bring in daily income as we moved from place to place. I told him about the incident in the Great Forest. Then I told him how we met Paul and his Fittoa Search and Rescue Team, and how that was the first we'd learned of the situation back home. I told him how we headed north while searching for information, and about the events that transpired in the Shirone Kingdom. I tried to be as concise as possible, keeping the conversation centered around Eris.

Alphonse listened in quietly, but when I told him about how we'd parted with Ruijerd, he spoke up. "The man who escorted you returned home?"

"Yes, he really looked out for us."

"Truly? Once things settle down, I'd like to propose to Eris that we officially reward him for his assistance."

"He's not the type of person who would accept something like that."

"Is that right?" Alphonse nodded and quietly glanced over at me. His eyes were those of an exhausted man. "Well, Master Rudeus...of those who served Lord Sauros, it is only the three of us who remain."

"What about the other maids?" I asked.

"Judging by the fact that they haven't returned, they're either dead or they've returned to their homeland."

"Oh, all right." So even the cat-eared girls were wiped out? Or perhaps some of them returned to their home in the Great Forest.

"And the lord took such good care of them, too. How dreadful."

"It was ultimately nothing more than a financial relationship to them, I assume." When I said that, Alphonse's poker face cracked slightly. My words might have been a tad harsh, but I was sure they were true.

"Because of your youth, I hesitated over whether or not to include you in this conversation. But if you can retort like that, I'm sure you're more than capable. You protected Lady Eris and delivered her here safely. As a way to recognize your achievements, we welcome you as vassal to the Boreas Greyrat family."

A vassal? So that's what this gathering was?

"Henceforth, I will be conducting this as a meeting between vassals. You take no issue with this, I presume?"

A meeting? I was sure they'd probably conducted these meetings even before I was sent to tutor Eris. I was also sure that Ghislaine hadn't been included back then. There were only three of us right now, but many vassals had undoubtedly gathered for such discussions in the past.

"Thank you. What is the topic at hand?" I had no intention of engaging in idle banter, so I cut to the chase. Besides, Philip and Sauros were no longer here. It was obvious who we were going to be talking about.

"It's about Lady Eris."

See? Just what I said.

"Specifically, I'd like to talk about her future."

"Her future?" I echoed.

Eris had returned to her homeland, but there was nothing here. She had no family and no household. She couldn't return to the life she'd enjoyed before.

"While it's true that Lord Sauros and Lord Philip have passed, the Boreas family itself hasn't been completely destroyed, correct? They can at least prepare a place for her to live in, right?" I asked.

"Lord James would be concerned about rumors. I think it likely he would refuse to take Lady Eris into his household."

James... In other words, Eris' uncle, right? The current Liege Lord. If he cared that much about what people thought, then he probably wouldn't want someone like Eris around. Her manners were a bit iffy, and she didn't exactly fit one's image of a noble lady. James was also supposedly sheltering Eris' brothers, and most likely a number of cousins as well. It wasn't difficult to imagine Eris causing strife with one or more of them.

"Even if he were willing to take her in, it's doubtful whether the other nobles would accept her as one of them. I can't picture her taking on the duties of a maid, either. Therefore, I'm going to reject the idea entirely."

I nodded at his words. He was right. Even though Eris had mellowed a bit, her wild disposition was the same as ever.

"Next, I'd like to discuss the invitation from Pilemon Notos Greyrat. He said that when Eris returned home, if she had no other place to go, he would be willing to welcome her as one of his concubines."

Pilemon—my uncle and Paul's younger brother. He was the current head of the Notos household. I'd gotten the sense old man Sauros didn't like him at all.

When I glanced at Ghislaine, I saw she had her brows knit and her eyes closed.

"It's not a bad option," Alphonse said. "But there are some troubling rumors about him."

"Troubling rumors?" I asked.

"Yes, about him trying to curry favor with High Minister Darius, who has rapidly been gaining political power as of late."

Why was that troubling? Wasn't it normal for powerful people to curry favor with those who possessed more influence than them?

"Lord Darius has been gaining power for the past few decades, and supports the First Prince's ascension to the throne. He's also primarily responsible for driving the Second Princess out of the country."

I have no idea what you're talking about when you suddenly bring up First-this and Second-that, I thought.

"Lord Pilemon was once amongst a group of those supporting the Second Princess, but..."

"But when she was driven out of the country, his group lost all of its power?" I guessed.

"Precisely."

In other words, the big boss on his side lost and now he was scheming to try to switch over to the winning team. "I don't see the problem," I said.

"Lord Rudeus, do you remember that kidnapping incident from some time ago?"

"Kidnapping incident?"

"The one where actual kidnappers seized Lady Eris."

The kidnapping plan I'd proposed, then.

"The one behind that crime was Lord Darius," Alphonse said.

"...Hm."

"Lord Darius has only been to the Fittoa Region once, and in that time, it took just one glance for him to take a deep interest in Lady Eris."

"You mean in a sexual sense?" I asked.

"Of course."

So, the truth was revealed after all these years. No—he'd probably been identified as the culprit even back then, but they couldn't afford to kick up a fuss because of how powerful he was.

I wondered why Sauros had refused to let him have Eris. Was it because he hated Darius? The old man had been the type to let his personal feelings dictate his actions. Well, whatever the basis for his decision, it didn't matter much now.

"If Lord Pilemon were to take Lady Eris as his concubine, he would probably find some excuse to offer her to Lord Darius."

Hmm, so Darius had been the perverted noble all this time. Apparently, there were a lot of those in the Asura Kingdom. Granted, he had good taste if he fancied Eris, though that taste was the only non-terrible thing about him.

"Well, we're rejecting that idea, right?"

"Not quite. While I can't help but grimace at the idea of the man himself, Lord Darius has the most influence in the capital right now. Lady Eris won't like him, but it *would* guarantee her status and the comfort of her living conditions."

"But still..."

"And if she were to make a bit of a selfish request, he would surely listen to her. For example, if she requested the development of a village in the Fittoa Region for its people."

Now I understood. If she became a powerful woman herself, then she'd be able to tap into his money and influence. Even so, I didn't like the idea of Eris being with that pervert. "What are our other options?"

"As for the other nobles... With Lord Sauros and Lord Philip gone, Lady Eris doesn't have any value left as the daughter of a noble family."

Value, hm? Maybe that was how they saw it. In my eyes, Eris already had plenty of value just on her own.

"Lord Rudeus, which do you think is the best route for us to take?" Alphonse asked.

"Before I state my opinion, can I ask what Ghislaine thinks?" I hadn't gathered my thoughts yet.

"I think Lady Eris should stay with Rudeus."

"With me?"

"You're Paul's son. Zenith was also from a powerful noble family in Millishion. With your lineage and background, you should be able to make a place for yourself among the Asuran nobility."

I wasn't so sure about that. I looked at Alphonse to gauge his reaction.

"It's not out of the question. Lord Paul has accomplished much during this incident. If you use that to your advantage, you should be able to consolidate some power and influence. However, getting the Liege Lord to let you oversee the Fittoa Region would be far more difficult. I can't imagine Pilemon would allow a son of Lord Paul to have any power. I also can't imagine that Lord James and

Lord Darius would look kindly upon Eris marrying into the family of another influential person."

No, I didn't think so. Still, I more or less understood what Alphonse was getting at. He was thinking about how to ultimately secure the revival of the region.

"In that case, Rudeus should just take Lady Eris and run away," Ghislaine said.

"And then what happens to the Fittoa Region?" Alphonse snapped.

"You deal with it." Ghislaine retorted coldly. Perhaps she and Alphonse just fundamentally did not get along.

"Would it not be the realization of our dearest wish, if Lady Eris were to take control over the land that Lord Sauros so loved?"

"That's *your* greatest wish. Don't lump me in with you. I just want Lady Eris to be happy."

"And you think she'll be happy if she runs away with Lord Rudeus?"

"Happier than if she's forced to marry Pilemon," Ghislaine argued.

"And what about the people of the region?"

"I don't care about them. Lady Eris was never expected to deal with those matters from the start."

It seemed our group of vassals was divided. Alphonse wanted Eris to follow in Sauros and Phillip's footsteps and take over management of the land. If that required her to endure living with a pervert, she just needed to suck it up. Ghislaine, on the other hand, just wanted Eris to be happy. As far as she was concerned, Eris should abandon her political power and family name to elope with me.

Personally, I leaned toward Ghislaine's way of thinking. It wasn't logical; it was entirely emotional. But still, I didn't want a girl I cared about to be taken by some pig. If those were our options, then we'd be better off eloping. I didn't care about political power.

I did understand what Alphonse was saying, and why he thought it was important. I just didn't agree with him.

"Looks like we're at a standstill," I mumbled. And when I did, the two who had previously been arguing looked my way.

"What do you mean?" Alphonse asked.

"Whatever it is, Eris is the one who gets to decide. There's no point in us even discussing it. So, let's try to find a more constructive topic of conversation. Is there anything else?"

Alphonse stared at me dumbfounded. Ghislaine also went quiet again.

"If not, then I'm going to rest."

Just like that, the day's meeting ended.

Chapter 13: **The Young Miss's Resolution**

By the time the meeting ended, the sun had already set. I returned to my room. It was furnished with only the barest of essentials, and my luggage was strewn across it. While I recognized the need to tidy up, I felt no motivation to do so. Instead, I sat on my bed. My body sank into the hard mattress. I seemed to be more exhausted than I thought I was.

“Phew...”

Not that I’d done anything particularly exhausting today. Still, the fatigue clung fast to my body. Perhaps this was what people called mental exhaustion? No, that wasn’t it. I’d just received a huge shock.

Sauros, Phillip and Hilda—I’d never had a particularly intimate conversation with any of them. Still, when I closed my eyes, I remembered going out for a long ride with Sauros, inspecting the region’s crops while he asked about how Eris was doing. I remembered Philip with that awful smile on his face as he proposed we take over the Boreas household together. I remembered how Hilda begged me to marry her daughter and become a part of their family.

They were all gone now. Not even their house remained. That vast manor, through which booming voices had echoed, was gone. The reception hall where Eris and I had danced, the tower where the old man had his trysts, the library piled with documentation relating to the region...it was all just gone.

It wasn’t just the manor, either. Buena Village was gone, too; not that I’d gone to see for myself. The tree in our

garden that Zenith treasured so much, the ones that were charred by lightning when Roxy was teaching me Saint-tier water magic, and the large tree that Sylphie and I had played under...all of those were gone, too.

Wait...why were trees the only thing that came to mind when I tried to remember Buena Village? Well, whatever. It was all gone. I'd understood that logically after Paul told me as much, but seeing it in person was a bigger shock than I thought it would be.

"Phew..."

Just as I let out another sigh, a loud banging came upon my door.

"Come on in." I bade them enter.

It was Eris. "Evening, Rudeus."

"Eris, are you all right now?"

"I'm fine," she said as she came to stand before me, taking up her usual pose. She didn't look depressed at all. Impressive as ever. Her family had been completely wiped out and she was still far stronger than I was. Actually, she usually wouldn't even knock, just bust the door open with her foot. Perhaps she was depressed.

"Well, I figured this was how things would end up."

"Oh really...?"

Eris spoke as if it didn't bother her at all. Like she said before, it seemed she'd prepared herself for this. Specifically, for the possibility of her family being dead. I couldn't bring myself to do the same. Even now, not knowing where Zenith was, I had to believe she was alive. It was much more likely that she was dead, and I understood that intellectually, but couldn't bring myself to accept it.

"Eris, what are you going to do after this?"

“What do you mean?”

“Um, you heard about things from Mister Alphonse, right?”

“I did. But who cares about all that?”

“‘Who cares’...?” I echoed back.

Eris was looking straight at me. Suddenly I realized—albeit a little late—that her outfit was different. She was clad in the black one-piece that she hadn’t worn once since she bought it back in Millishion. It matched so well with her red hair that it looked almost like a dress. I could see her breasts pushing through the thin material.

Huh? She’s not wearing a bra, then? Upon closer inspection, I realized her hair was a bit damp. I could smell soap too, something I only ever noticed right after she bathed. And it wasn’t just that. Normally, Eris didn’t have a particular smell to her, but I was catching a faint, sweet fragrance now. Perfume?

“Rudeus, I’m alone now.”

Alone—that was true. She had no family. She had brothers related to her by blood, but they weren’t family.

“And besides that, I recently turned fifteen.”

The moment I heard her say *fifteen*, I panicked. When? When had her birthday passed? Mine was just a month or two away, which meant hers must have been about a month ago. I didn’t even realize.

“Um, sorry for not remembering.”

Which day had been her birthday? I couldn’t remember her even dropping a hint about it. I would’ve thought Eris would make a lot of fuss over turning fifteen. Had there really been nothing? No day when she’d said something to indicate that it was her birthday?

"You may not have realized it, but it was the day that Ruijerd told me I was an adult."

"Ahh." So that was it. It all made sense now.

This sucks. I seriously didn't notice, I thought.

"Uhhh, should I get something for you? Is there anything you want?"

"Yes, there's one thing I want," she said.

"What's that?"

"A family."

I was at a loss for words when she said that. That wasn't something I could give her. I couldn't bring people back to life.

"Rudeus, become my family."

"Huh?" When I suddenly looked at her, I could tell that despite how dark the room had grown, her face was bright red. Was this...well, you know...a proposal? "You mean like brother and sister?"

"I don't care what you want to call it." She was red all the way up to her ears, but she still wouldn't turn her gaze away. "S-so, basically, what I'm saying is, um...let's sleep together."

I had no idea what she was talking about, believe me!

Just calm down and let's think about the meaning of her words, I told myself. I could surmise, based on her proposal that we should sleep together, that she was shocked by everything that had happened, too. She probably wanted to be with me to heal the wounds inflicted on her heart.

A family. Or in this case, a pretend family, I suppose?

But...

"I'm feeling kind of lonely today, so I might end up doing something perverted to you."

To be honest, I had no confidence in myself. I mean, I wasn't confident that I could get into bed with her, feel the heat of her body, and still be able to hold myself back. Even Eris should've understood that much. And yet...

"Y-you can do it today."

"I already told you before, it's not going to be just 'a little bit' if I do it," I warned.

"I remember. And I'm saying that you can have your way with me."

After hearing her reply, I stared fixedly at Eris' face. *What the heck are you saying?* I found myself thinking. I mean, come on. After being told that, my little man was now having his own little standing ovation.

"Wh-why are you suddenly saying all of this?" I asked.

"I promised you we would when I turned fifteen, right?"

"That was when *I* turned fifteen, right?"

"I don't mind either way," she said.

"*I* do mind."

This was weird. Something was weird. Come on, think, what was it that was weird? Oh, I got it! In other words, Eris was feeling desolate. So perhaps she was being self-destructive. I'd seen scenes like this numerous times in erotic games. People comforted each other to cope when they lost someone. And by comfort, I mean locked their bodies together physically. Okay, yep, I got it.

Still, what did that say about me if I put my hands on her in this kind of situation? It was almost like I was taking advantage of her when she was weak. Of course, I wanted

to do it, okay? The worst part of me was rejoicing: *let's throw away our virginity!*

But wasn't that something I should do under more normal circumstances? We were both in pain, and if we let ourselves be caught up in the moment, we would regret it later, I was sure.

Ahh, but I might not get another chance with her giving me permission like this. If she suddenly decided to go off and be with Pilemon, our promise would go out the window.

No, forget that. I really didn't want Eris' first time to be stolen by someone else. I wanted to do it. I did. But I had a feeling we shouldn't.

I'd made fun of all the indecisive protagonists of harem stories before. I'd called them cowards who couldn't pluck up the courage when it was necessary. And now that it was actually my turn to be in the same situation, I was the one hesitating.

What was I supposed to do? Whatever I decided, I felt like I'd regret it later. I would only stop regretting it two years from now when, on my fifteenth birthday, Eris would present herself with a ribbon wrapped around her body. "Here's your birthday present. Since I might accidentally punch you, I tied my hands up too. Feel free to do what you want to me," she would say as she sat atop my bed.

Ahh, no. Wait. I'd almost died recently. In what I'd thought were my final moments of life, I'd been full of regret. There were still things I wanted to do, and no guarantee that something similar wouldn't happen in the two years that remained before my fifteenth birthday. It wasn't like I could narrowly escape death forever. Maybe I should get rid of my virginity right now, before any similar troubles arose in the future?

No, but, wait a sec...

“Jeez!”

Eris must’ve been frustrated at my indecision. She cleared her throat and then softly sat herself upon my lap. She positioned herself sideways so she could wrap her arms around my neck, presenting me with the vista of her tanned breasts and beautiful face. She opened her mouth like she was going to speak, then suddenly realized something was pressing against her thigh. Her face went even redder.

“What the heck is that...?”

“It’s because you’re so cute.”

Eris merely hummed in return, and ground her thighs against the head of my little man. It was a soft and pleasant sensation. My little man was overjoyed, and his father (me) was growing short of breath.

“This means you’re turned on right now?” she asked.

“Yeah.”

“So you don’t dislike me, right?”

“Nope.”

“Are you worried about my father and grandfather?”

“Yeah.”

“Rudeus, you’ve been giving me a naughty look this entire time.”

“Yeah.”

“But you’re still going to refuse me?”

“...Yeah.” I nodded finally.

My gaze was pinned to the base of her neck, her chest. She had already conquered my body with her soft thighs, the feel of her chest pressed against me, and her scent, which filled my lungs as I inhaled. I was like a dog wagging its tail. But I summoned the last threads of reason that

remained within me and said, "A promise is a promise, isn't it? We said we'd wait until I turned fifteen."

In the moment, speaking frankly, that promise meant squat to me. Even I wasn't entirely sure why I was holding myself back.

In response to my words, Eris just huffed. Her breath caressed my cheek.

"Hey, Rudeus. My mother taught me this, but since it's embarrassing and I'm forbidden from using it anymore, I'm only going to say it once," she said, taking in a deep breath. She brought her face close to my ear.

Then came a few words, in a tone so soft and sweet, it was as if a forbidden seal had been undone. "Rudeus, I want to be your little kitty. Mew~"

Those words went straight through my ear and infiltrated my simpleton's brain, snuffing out the last threads of reason that were keeping me from giving in. Eris was a dog. A wild dog, even though her last word was 'mew'. In response to those words, I became a beast, too. A creature of instinct, one that shoved Eris down onto the bed.



That night, Eris and I ascended the steps to adulthood together. During that time, I forgot all about the other complicated matters weighing on us. All I could think about was how I wanted to be with Eris. I didn't say as much, but I think I loved her. I wanted to protect her forever. I didn't care about the circumstances.

Paul had said it himself, hadn't he? Who cared about a noble's duties? I didn't need to think about stuff like that. I would do anything to help her. While we were at it, three children would be fine, but I was sure we'd make more than that.

I was elated. It never even crossed my mind to wonder what Eris might be thinking.

Eris

My name is Eris Boreas Greyrat.

That day, I became an adult. Rudeus gave me the present I wanted for my fifteen birthday. It was a bit different than what we'd promised, but we tied ourselves together all the same.

I loved Rudeus. When was it that I first started to realize my feelings? That's right—it was on his tenth birthday. I was sleeping when my mother suddenly shook me awake, dressed me in a bright red nightgown and, with a serious look on her face, told me, "Go to Rudeus' bed and surrender your body to him."

I wasn't against having sex, but I was confused. My mother and Edna had explained it to me and made sure I

understood it would happen some day. Still, I wasn't prepared for it then. I'd thought it would be further in the future.

Regardless of whether Rudeus knew of my trepidation, he touched my body anyway. He and my father had stayed up late talking together, so perhaps he'd already been told about this. As I considered that, another thought popped into my head.

Maybe he doesn't actually love me.

Perhaps he was only doing it because my father told him to. Even back then, Rudeus was an amazing person. He knew everything and he could do anything, but that didn't hamper his desire to keep learning. He just kept moving forward.

I was sure he suited me well. Yet, as his breathing grew ragged, I didn't get the sense he cared about my feelings. I was just a reward given to him by my father. When I realized that I wasn't okay with it anymore, I shoved him away and made a dash for it. I started back toward my room, but then I got scared. Maybe I'd just done something that I could never take back. Maybe I'd just wasted my last chance. My mother told me that no one but Rudeus would have me, and I was sure she was right. I'd met with the other children of noble families numerous times, but none of them had as much grit as Rudeus.

Rudeus had been interested in my body ever since we first met. He'd tried to flip my skirt, pull down my panties, feel up my breasts. Each time, I'd punch him to drive him away. Back when I still attended school, I would punch boys who made fun of me, and they would never utter anything cocky to me again. That didn't work with Rudeus. I honestly felt, with every fiber of my being, that when my mom said Rudeus was the only one, she was right. If he hated me, I thought I'd spend my entire life alone.

Who cares if I'm just a reward? I thought. *At least we can be together.* So, I returned to his room.

But when Rudeus saw me, he knelt to the ground and sprawled out like a frog. He apologized, saying he was the one in the wrong. In response, I just looked down at him and told him to wait five more years. At the time, I thought that would be enough. Rudeus was enough of an adult to wait for me.

That was when I started to fall in love with him.

However, things soon changed. We were transported off to god-knows-where, and, when we awoke, there was a Superd standing before us. I thought I was being punished. Punished for only doing as I pleased. Whenever I was being really selfish, my mother would warn me that the Superd would come and eat me. I thought I would be eaten by the demon that had appeared before us. *I should've let Rudeus do what he wanted to me that night,* I thought. We could save serious sex for when we turned fifteen. I should've just endured it and let him have his way that night, until he was satisfied.

I cried out and cowered on the ground. And the person who came to my rescue was neither my grandfather nor Ghislaine—it was Rudeus. Rudeus worked things out with the Superd. Even though he must've been overwhelmed with anxiety himself, even though I was older than him, he calmed and soothed me. It must've taken a lot of courage for him to do that. I fell in love all over again.

After that, even as his face went pale, he dealt with the demon folk. He didn't eat very much. He hid the fact that he wasn't feeling well, physically. I was sure he was keeping his suffering to himself because he didn't want to worry me, so I decided to restrain myself, too. I bit back the urge to yell and punch people, and let Rudeus handle things instead. I tried to act the same as I always did, but there were times

where I just couldn't hold it in—when the anxiety came boiling up from deep within me and wouldn't stop.

But Rudeus didn't get angry. He just stayed beside me. There were no cutting remarks—he just stroked my head, wrapped his arms around my shoulders, and comforted me. During those times, he never once crossed boundaries. He was normally so playfully obvious about being turned on by me, but during those times, he never touched me more than was necessary. Maybe he was trying to assuage my anxiety. He was thinking about me, not just himself.

I wanted to become stronger. At least strong enough to not be a burden on him. The only thing I could do better than Rudeus was wield my sword, and even in that regard, I couldn't compare to our companion, Ruijerd. And while I might have stood a chance in a swordfight, I couldn't beat Rudeus when he used magic.

Despite all that, Rudeus let me gain experience by fighting with them. I was sure the party would have had an easier time killing monsters and traveling overland if it had been just the two of them. The thought made me want to cry. I worried that Rudeus might realize I was holding them back, and come to hate me. I worried that he would leave me behind, so I worked desperately to get stronger.

I requested that Ruijerd train me. He knocked me down numerous times. Each time Ruijerd would ask me, "Do you understand?" Each time I would remember Ghislaine's words and nod. Rationality—that's right, rationality. There was a rationality to the way an expert moved. When training with someone stronger than me, the first thing to do was to observe them.

Ruijerd was strong. Stronger than Ghislaine, most likely. And so, I watched. I watched his movements intently and mimicked them where I was able. Ruijerd helped me in my quest to get stronger. In the middle of the night, after

Rudeus finally fell asleep, exhausted, Ruijerd would join me for training without once making a fuss about it. Of course, he still knocked me flat in every bout. Perhaps it was difficult for him to strike me down as he did, given how much he loved children, but I felt confident in calling him “Master.”

A year passed since we started our journey. I thought I’d become stronger. It was different from the understanding I thought I’d come to before, when I’d been told “Rationality, rationality!” repeatedly by Ghislaine. Through my training with Ruijerd, I finally understood the true meaning of the word. Previously, I hadn’t seen a problem with sloppy movements in battle, but I now understood that each and every movement had meaning to it.

Then one day, I managed to defeat Ruijerd. In retrospect, it seemed like he had his attention drawn toward something else. Still, I didn’t care that it was a distraction which created the opening. I’d finally landed one on him. Now I wouldn’t be a hindrance anymore. I could walk beside Rudeus.

Yeah, I sure let myself get carried away.

Rudeus easily deflated my swollen head. He’d suddenly acquired a demon eye and had no trouble using it to hold me down. I lost to him in a straight-up physical sparring match with no magic. It was a shock. It was cheating, I thought—foul play. In a single leap, he’d overtaken me on a road I’d walked for years.

I was just as much of a hindrance as ever.

I cried in secret. Early the next morning I went to the beach and sobbed as I swung my sword. Ruijerd told me not to worry about it. Rudeus was just very compatible with the demon eye he’d received. He told me if I trained, I’d get stronger. That I had talent, and shouldn’t give up.

What talent? All Ghislaine and Ruijerd did was lie to me. At the time, Rudeus looked so grand to me. He shone so large and so bright that I couldn't even look at him directly. I'd put him on a pedestal. I wanted to catch up to him, but I'd given up at some point, thinking it was fruitless.

That changed after we crossed the Millis Continent. That was when we met Geese and I learned there were combat techniques out there besides swordfighting and magic. I wanted to try to learn, but he refused me. At the time, I wondered why. I couldn't accept it.

Then there were the events in Millishion. I wanted to prove I could do things by myself, so I went to slay the simplest of creatures—goblins. That was when I caught the first glimpse of my own talent. I fought those strange assassins, and I overwhelmed them. At some point, I'd started to grow.

But when I went back to the inn, Rudeus was down in the dumps. When I pressed him for details, I found out that Paul was in the city, and that he and Rudeus had clashed. Even though Rudeus wasn't crying, when I saw the extent of his depression, I finally remembered he was two years younger than I was. Yet despite his age, he'd become the home tutor for someone as selfish as I. He'd had to celebrate his tenth birthday away from family, and was forced to travel the Demon Continent while shouldering a burden like me. Then his father pushed him away.

I absolutely could not forgive that. As someone whose name was listed amongst the nobility of Asura, I promised myself that I was going to cut down Paul Greyrat. I'd heard of Paul's strength from my own father. He was a genius swordsman who'd reached Advanced-tier in Sword God Style, Water God Style and North God Style. He was also Rudeus' father. Still, I didn't doubt that I could win. Ghislaine had taught me swordplay, but Ruijerd taught me combat. If I

combined the two, there was no way I would lose to that brute.

However, Ruijerd stopped me. When I asked why, he told me this was a fight between father and son. I knew Ruijerd regretted what happened with his own son, so I decided to listen.

Ultimately Rudeus and Paul made up. It was just as Ruijerd had said. But I'll say it again: I couldn't accept it. I couldn't understand why Rudeus forgave his father. I could never have forgiven someone like that. Rudeus didn't talk much about it, and Ruijerd wouldn't tell me anything, either. They were both adults.

From there, we crossed over to the Central Continent. That's when Rudeus started eating a bunch more, perhaps because he'd regained his spirit. As usual, he was incredible. In a single day, he managed to befriend the Third Prince and save his family.

As for me, the only thing I could do was go on a rampage with Ruijerd. We did help save Rudeus as a result, but we did it without any forethought. Afterward, Rudeus said things like, "I didn't do anything," and, "You guys really helped me out," but judging by what happened, he could have dealt with it all on his own.

Rudeus was so great. Too great. And he only got even greater on that day when we encountered the Dragon God. During the confrontation with Orsted, Ruijerd and I were terrified by what we saw as the embodiment of fear before us. Only Rudeus was completely unaffected.

He even managed to land an attack on Orsted—an opponent Ruijerd had been helpless against. My eyes couldn't follow the magic he unleashed back then. When Rudeus actually got serious in battle, he was amazing. He

actually managed to fight back against the man regarded as the strongest in the world, the Dragon God.

But just as soon as I thought that, Rudeus was fatally injured and dying. Until then, I'd thought death was something irrelevant to us. Rudeus was strong. There was no way he would die, and as long as I had him protecting me, I wouldn't die, either. We also had Ruijerd with us, so we were safe. That's what I'd thought.

I was mistaken.

If that girl accompanying the Dragon God hadn't spoken up on a whim, or if the Dragon God hadn't been able to use healing magic, Rudeus would have been gone right there. I was so scared. That incident renewed my fears of being a burden.

Now, Rudeus was becoming godlike. Even though he'd almost been killed, he was completely nonchalant about it. Just three days after he'd almost died, he was anticipating a future encounter with the Dragon God and practicing new magic to prepare for it. I couldn't comprehend that. I couldn't, and I was scared, so I just stayed beside him. I felt like if I didn't stay with him, he'd disappear and leave me behind.

Then we parted ways with Ruijerd. Ruijerd said that beating the Dragon God was impossible, but right there at the end, he taught me something. He reminded me of the technique the Dragon God had used. It was burned into my mind, the way he'd deflected my attack.

There was a method behind it. The Dragon God wasn't an unknown monster. He was a master, but he was using techniques known to man.

Finally, we made it home and I discovered nothing was left. My father, my grandfather, and my mother were dead. I

was heartbroken. After everything I'd suffered to make it back here, my house and my family were gone. Ghislaine and Alphonse were there, but they felt distant and formal, like they were different people.

All I had left was Rudeus, and I wanted us to become a family. I was impatient. His contract to tutor me had been five years long, and we'd already passed that point long ago. He'd finished his duty by escorting me home. Not everyone in his family had been found yet. I was sure he'd immediately be off again, and he would leave me behind. I just knew it.

I used my body in order to keep him here. He hesitated at first, and I worried he wouldn't accept me. Rudeus had always been interested in my underwear, but he never peeked in on me while I was bathing. Even on the ship traveling to the Millis Continent, when he could have touched me, stripped me, he didn't. Maybe he wasn't interested in my body. I spent all my time practicing the sword, and lacked the femininity that other girls had. I wondered if maybe, despite how perverted he was, he didn't actually want to have sex with someone like me.

That wasn't the case, though. Rudeus was turned on by me, and seeing him like that turned me on, too.

So, we connected our bodies. I'd never done it before, so it was painful at first, but gradually began to feel good. In comparison, Rudeus seemed to be enjoying it from the very beginning. And yet, partway through he grew weak and feeble, as if he might break. That was when I realized, once again, that Rudeus was smaller than I was. He was quite robust *down there*, but he was shorter than me and more slightly built.

He was so young, and yet he had always protected me. He spent the entire voyage healing my seasickness when we were on the ship, and was incredibly exhausted when we

disembarked. How could he be fine after riding something that atrocious? There was no way. That's right—if Rudeus hadn't spent so much energy on healing me, then maybe he wouldn't have been bested later that night by Geese. Compared to that, what was I? I'd gotten more powerful. I'd gotten fairly decent at swordplay. But I got so caught up in my image of Rudeus' magnificence that ignored how little he really was. In the end, I used my anxiety about losing my family as an excuse to force myself on him, and treated him poorly in the pursuit of my own desire.

I'll say it again. I loved Rudeus. But I was not fit to be with him. I would only be a burden to him. We had become family, but we couldn't become more than that. We couldn't be husband and wife. It was as he'd said: we were better as brother and sister. We weren't well balanced. Even if we were together, I'd just keep holding him back.

For now, it would be better if we spent some time apart. This thought occurred to me naturally. As long as I was with him, I would take advantage of his kindness. The sweet sensations of the night we'd spent together still lingered in my body, so much so that I ached for it. This was characteristic of the Greyrat family, though unexpectedly, Rudeus might not share those proclivities as strongly. He was trying his best to keep up with me, but at this rate, the fierceness of my desire might confuse him. I couldn't do that to him.

I had no intentions of doing what Alphonse said, and marrying another man. It was too late for him to tell me to live like the daughter of a noble family. Being told to make sacrifices for the region's citizens when I didn't even really know those citizens had no appeal to me. My grandfather, my father, and my mother were all gone. The Fittoa Region was gone. What was the point?

I would discard the Boreas name. But I was still the granddaughter of Sauros, and the daughter of my parents, and so I would live on with an iron will.

I'm going to get stronger, I resolved.

I would part with Rudeus and keep training. I wouldn't stop until I could stand side-by-side with him. I didn't have to be able to defeat him. But at the very least, I wanted to become a woman who was befitting of his stature. One who wouldn't have people whispering behind her back if she got close to him.

I didn't have Rudeus' shrewdness, so instead, I would seek power. Ghislaine, Ruijerd, and Geese had said I had talent with the sword, and I would trust their words. I would follow Ghislaine's recommendation and head to the Sword Sanctum. There, I would become a powerful, precise swordswoman.

A swordswoman (me) and a magician (Rudeus). The traditional pairing was the other way around, but both of us were fine with that. We would grow, get stronger, and meet each other again. Then we would take the next step in our family and become husband and wife. I would have his kids and we would live happily ever after,

Now then, how should I go about telling him goodbye? Rudeus was an excellent speaker. No matter what I tried to say, he might stop me. He might try to come with me because he was worried about me being alone.

Perhaps I should leave a note...? But knowing me, I'd probably leave some kind of trace behind when I did so. He could use that to track me down, and it would be a mess. He needed to move forward. I didn't want to hold him back.

At times like these, it was best to act like the swordsmen in all of the stories and quietly leave. But

Rudeus was always going on endlessly about reports, communication, and discussion. I didn't want him to hate me.

All right. I would leave something short. Then, surely, Rudeus would understand.

Rudeus

Good morning, everyone! Yes, good morning to all you virgins out there, it's a great morning! They say it's only permissible to still be a virgin while you're in grade school, so how about you guys? Ohh, me? I'm not so great. Ha ha, I'll soon be thirteen. If we convert that to school years, that means I'm already in middle school. Ha ha!

Also, hello there to all you non-virgins! From today on, I'm one of you guys! In other words, I'm a "normie" now! I never thought I'd be joining you, but I hope you'll give me a warm welcome, since I'm just a beginner. Like they say, rich people care about profit and fighting only brings losses, so let's be friends!

I'd heard rumors that fleshlights felt even better than a real woman's body, but they were all lies. Besides, fleshlights were missing various things, like real lips and a tongue. Sight, hearing, touch, taste, smell—there was something about sex that satisfied all five senses.

There was a saying back in my old world: "Don't act like you're her boyfriend just because you've had sex one time." I understood what people meant by that, but—and I'm not really sure how to say this—but when I wrapped my arms around her waist and pulled her close, she slipped hers around my back and returned the embrace. I could hear her ragged breathing in my ear, and when I looked at her face,

our eyes locked. If I kissed around her mouth, she'd stick out her tongue, and it was a flood upstairs and downstairs.

You just really feel like you belong to each other in that moment. It's not just physically but mentally fulfilling, I guess? Wanting each other and giving yourself to each other? Those of you with tons more experience are probably thinking, "Don't get carried away just because you did it once." But I couldn't help it. I wanted to act like I was her boyfriend. Eris probably wanted to act like she was my girlfriend, too.

Whoops, sorry about that. That was probably a bit too stimulating for you virgins out there. How rude of me. Based on my own internal sense of time, I'd been thirsting for forty-seven years, so I was a little excited now that I'd finally gotten what I wanted. Or maybe it was more accurate to say I'd *lost* what I wanted?

Long ago, I thought I'd try to keep it cool even if I managed to lose my virginity. Oops! Guess I was wrong. Oh my, it's already this late? Sorry, I've got a date with my girlfriend to have some pillow talk this morning. I'm sure we'll be getting it on hot and heavy tonight. Maybe we'll get some afternoon delight, too!

Come on, Eris, it's morning! Wake up. If you don't wake up, I'm going to prank you, I thought playfully.

Except she wasn't there. The space in the bed next to me was empty. Well, she did tend to be an early riser, after all. What a shame. So much for the traditional morning pillow talk and subsequent coffee break.

"Oof!"

I lifted myself up. There was a pleasant exhaustion in the area around my hips. It was reassurance that what happened last night wasn't just a dream. A truly delightful sensation.

I found my pants, but my underwear was missing. Oh well. I just put on my pants without them, and since Eris' panties were at the side of the bed, I pocketed them. Then I slipped on a jacket and let out a big yawn.

"Hmm, this is good." I'd never had a morning this refreshing before.

Just then, I realized something was strewn about the floor. There was something red scattered everywhere.

"Huh...?"

It was hair. Crimson hair that had fallen all over the floor.

"What the...heck is this...?" I grabbed a strand of hair and tried sniffing it. It was the same scent I'd caught a lot of last night—Eris' scent.

"Wha...?" Confused, I looked in front of me and saw a single piece of paper. I grabbed it and read the words scrawled on it.

The two of us aren't well-balanced right now. I'm setting off.

I digested those words carefully.

One second. Two. Three.

I flew out the door.

I looked in Eris' room. There was no luggage there. I went outside and entered the headquarters, where I found Alphonse.

"Hey, Mister Alphonse, where's Eris?!"

"She set off on a trip with Ghislaine."

"Wh-where?!"

Alphonse regarded me with cold indifference in his eyes. Then, he slowly said, "I was told to keep that a secret from you."

"Oh... is that so...?"

Huh?

Why?

I didn't get it.

Huh??

Why did she break up with me?

No, she abandoned me?

She left me behind?

Huh?

Family...?

What??

I spent a whole week sitting around unable to do anything, entirely dumbfounded. Occasionally, Alphonse would come by and nag me about getting a job or something. I didn't think there was anything left in the Fittoa Region, but small, developing villages were gradually being built just a short distance from the refugee camp. People were even beginning to cultivate wheat.

Per Alphonse's instruction, I used earth magic to construct a defensive wall around the camp. The river threatened to flood with its embankment eroded, so I created a levee. Progress was gradual, but the restoration was proceeding. Apparently, earnest efforts at rebuilding

would commence after the vast number of people from Millishion finished migrating here.

Eris chose death for herself.

The person known as Eris Boreas Greyrat was no more. In her place, there was now simply Eris. Alphonse said her decision was going to cause several complications, so any official announcement of her fate would be postponed a few years. He was probably acting on orders from Darius. Not that I cared.

Even though Eris was suddenly gone, Alphonse's facial expression gave no indication it bothered him at all. Half-jokingly, I told him, "It's a shame Eris got away," but he just nonchalantly deflected it by saying, "Regardless, I have to work toward the Fittoa Region's recovery."

I needed to ask more questions to get a better handle on the situation. However, with Eris gone, I felt more or less apathetic about things. If the nobles wanted to fight over authority or whatever, they were welcome to do so.

I thought deeply about why Eris left. I reflected on my words and actions that night. However, no matter how I tried to backtrack, the only thing that stayed in my mind was our lovemaking. It was as if that moment drowned out all other details of that night.

Maybe I was actually bad at it? I just followed my desires when I took the lead, so maybe she felt disillusioned by how things played out? No, that would be odd. I was the one who went for it, but she was the one who invited me.

No, that wasn't it. Her fondness for me had just run out. As I recalled the past three years, I realized our trip was

riddled with failures. We got here in the end, but that was largely thanks to Ruijerd. Eris must've hated the idea of being followed around by the cause of all those failures for another two years. That was why she'd fulfilled her promise early and said goodbye.

I had no idea why she acted as if there were a deeper meaning behind her actions, but for the moment, that was the conclusion I came to. In the end, I hadn't really grown at all. It was no wonder her feelings for me had faded.

It was then that I suddenly remembered I had another mission of my own. "Ah, that's right. I need to search for Zenith..."

And that was how I set out for the northern part of the Central Continent.

Interlude: The Two She Encountered

Roxy Migurdia arrived in the town of Krasma, located at the tip of the northwestern part of the Demon Continent. It was a thriving town, albeit not as robust as Rikarisu. Though it looked unremarkable at first glance, this entire area was ruled by a Demon King. One with intimate ties to the seafolk, allowing the town to trade with them. With the seafolk came seafood, and with the demons came strong, fragrant spices unique to the Demon Continent, and it was in the town of Krasma that you could taste the delicious food that resulted from the combination. The town boasted such flavorful cuisine that it regularly tied with Wind Port for the title of the place on the Demon Continent with the most delicious food.

“This food really goes great with some alcohol!”

Ever since they arrived in this town, Talhand had been in good spirits. Krasma didn’t just have the bitter alcohol of the Demon Continent, but the sweet alcohol of the seafolk as well. Talhand, being a dwarf, loved alcohol, and as long as the drinking was fun, he didn’t seem to mind how bad it tasted. When he went to the pub, he invariably hit it off with the ruffians there and drank enough alcohol to fill an entire bathtub. Pubs were everywhere in Krasma, so between that and the good food, Talhand was in paradise.

As for Roxy, she still had the tastes of a child despite her age, so the cuisine of this town didn’t agree with her. The food and seasonings of the Demon Continent weren’t her thing, on the whole. She liked sweet things.

The saving grace was the seafolk’s specialty, which was sweet alcohol. It came as quite a shock to Roxy, who’d

only ever associated alcohol with bitterness. The liquor had an airy, seashore-like fragrance to it, and if you took a drink, an indescribably sweet flavor would spread in your mouth. The aftertaste left a bit of saltiness, which only made you want to snack as you drank.

“Now that’s a rare sight! So you’re drinkin’ too, eh, Roxy?!”

“Yes, I am.”

“Yer in a good mood today, eh?” Talhand watched as Roxy drank and cheerfully put in his next order. “Barkeep, bring us a cask! I’ll teach ya how to drink like a dwarf!”

In times like these, Roxy thought they were sure fortunate that things were so cheap on the Demon Continent. You could drink and eat as much as you wanted and still cover the cost with one Asura copper coin.

“Old man, you’re really chugging that down good!”

“Drink! Drink! Drink! Drink!”

“Just what you’d expect from a dwarf!”

“Mmkay, let’s have a competition! Barkeep, bring me a cask, too!”

Incidentally, Elinalise had already disappeared into the night with some man she’d hit it off with. This was normally the point where Roxy would start to feel a bit alienated, but before she realized it, she and the girl sitting next to her were both hooting at the boisterous Talhand.

“Bwahaha! What a fine dwarf you are! No matter how the times may change, the dwarves remain the same! You agree with me, don’t ya?” the girl asked.

“Yes, certainly,” Roxy answered.

“Oh, here we go! Go on, chug! Chug! Chug!”

“Chug, chug!”

Talhand brazenly faced his drinking partner—a gigantic demon—with his arms wrapped around his cask, quaffing away. His body was certainly broad, but you still couldn't help but wonder where all that liquor was going. Once he emptied his enormous cask, he let out a guttural sigh. Just as quickly, the next drink was brought forth.

"Yer late with that alcohol!"

"Oh shut it! I'm out of stock!"

"In that case, go buy out the pub next door!"

"Ooh, there's an idea! Okay then, you go buy it for us!"

"Just leave it to me! Put in yer coins, boys, put 'em in! We're gonna drink it up tonight!"

"Yaaaaah!"

They passed around a bag for donations.

"Haha! Miss, you're being awfully generous to pitiful drunkards like us!"

"Yes, it's my treat today!" Roxy dropped a green ore coin into the bag as it made its rounds.

Seeing that, the man holding it grinned hugely and chuckled as he bowed his head to her. "Impressive, miss! You must be rich!"

"Of course I am!" Roxy was in a pleasant mood, feeling light and airy as she nodded at him in an exaggerated way. She was, in fact, already drunk.

"Hahaha! I'm rich today too, so here you are, take it! And let's make some more noise! We're all friends here today!" The girl sitting beside her took a crude iron coin from her pocket and tossed it in the bag as well.

The man holding the bag might have barked at her for only donating such a pittance, but he was drunk himself.

"Heh heh! Thank ya kindly, princess! I'll be usin' this to make sure you guys drink until you're pukin'!"

"Yeah, let's barf it all up!" The little girl gave a self-important nod as the man kept doing on his rounds, gathering up people's money.

"Yeah, this is it, this is great! Makes me remember the old days!"

Roxy had no idea when the young girl had taken up the seat beside her. By the time she'd noticed, the girl was already there, munching on the food that Elinalise had left behind. Roxy didn't mind. She was drunk.

"Well, here, have another."

"Aah, thank you. Glad to see this is such a joyous atmosphere, makes me glad I came. Here, you drink some too!" the girl said.

"I am drinking," Roxy replied.

"Drink some more!"

"More? I suppose I have no choice." Roxy did as she was told, and gulped down the contents of the glass.

"Pwah!"

"All right, one more for the young miss here!"

"Oh, thank you."

She slammed her glass onto the table and some jovial gentleman came along and filled it for her. She really could drink this sweet liquor forever.

"You're quite something, a real drinker! Quite amazing for someone so young!"

"I don't want to hear that from you," Roxy quipped, scrutinizing the girl. She wore boots that came up to her knees, leather hot pants, and a leather tube top. The pale skin of her clavicle, waist, belly button, and thighs were all

in full view. She had voluminous purple hair set in waves, and horns like a goat. It was obvious, no matter how you looked at her, that she was younger than Roxy.

“Heh heh, no need for flattery. I know how old I am!”

Roxy should have suspected something was up by now, but she didn’t have the wherewithal at the moment. Because she was drunk.

“I know my age as well,” she said. “Well, drink up.”

“Ohh, thank you. The alcohol here sure has gotten tastier in the last few hundred years. In the old days, the Demon Content didn’t have sweet alcohol like this.”

“This is the seafolk’s alcohol,” Roxy told her. “The Demon King here struck a deal with them.”

“What’s that! Bagura Hagura, you bastard, you hid this from me! I won’t forgive you for it!”

“Let it go,” Roxy cooed, “we’re all here as equals today, right? Equals!”

“Ohh, that’s right, we’re all equals here!”

Demon King Bagura Hagura was the ruler of this region. He was a burly, pig-faced demon, said to be the most knowledgeable entity on the Demon Continent when it came to food and alcohol. Politically, he was a moderate, but still participated on the front lines of Laplace’s War. When he was on human lands, he’d stolen food and liquor from house after house, earning the title of the Plundering King.

“Ooh, he’s out!”

“Gwaaahah, who’s up next? I’ll take on anyone! If ya want, I’ll take on two of ya at once!”

At some point Talhand had stripped the clothes from his chest and perched himself squarely atop a table. He had

his elbow balanced on top of a cask and was giving off an air of superiority.

“Anybody? Anybody at all?!”

The girl beside Roxy spoke up. “All right, leave it to me!”

“Whassat, girl, ya think ya can win against me? Maybe ya should try again in another twenty years.”

“Ha ha ha! Foolish dwarf! I’ve already lived three hundred years! A mere twenty would change nothing!”

“Ah, is that so? M’bad, then. Go ahead and come at me!”

“Ah, but...first, I would ask you to state your name! I will be sure to remember you for being foolish enough to challenge me!”

“Talhand of the Harsh, Large Mountain Summit!”

“All right then! The one to defeat you will be I, the Demon Emperor of Demon Eyes, Kishirika Kishirisu!”

And so, Kishirika and Talhand’s battle began. The additional alcohol they bought was soon gone and funds had to be solicited a second and then a third time. Roxy took it upon herself to donate five whole green ore coins, sending the pub’s errand boy running to get more. Brawny men came carrying in large amounts of liquor, which those in the pub shared amongst themselves as Talhand and Kishirika drank away. Roxy was to be the judge. She had no idea how or what she was supposed to judge, but she took up a seat between them and sipped away at her own drink as she accepted the role of counting theirs.

“That’s number forty,” she announced.

Leaving aside Talhand, whose drinking habits matched his dwarven heritage, just where was Kishirika, who looked like a little girl and proclaimed herself a Demon Emperor,

putting all that alcohol? No one seemed to mind it because they were all drunk. And then the deciding moment came.

“Mrgh... blegh...” Just seconds after Talhand squeaked out those strange noises, alcohol came rocketing out of him like a water fountain. Then he collapsed, clutching his stomach, which now resembled the casks he’d been drinking from. He fell from the top of the table to the ground with a noisy thud, alcohol spilling from his mouth.

“I win!”

“Whooooo! Amazin’! You beat a dwarf in a drinking match!”

“My name is Kishirika, after all. The Demon World’s Great Emperor Kishirika Kishirisu! Now, say my name!”

“Kishirika! Kishirika! Kishirika!”

“Who’s the greatest in the world?!”

“Kishirika! Kishirika! Kishirika!”

A chorus of chanting broke out when Kishirika was announced the victor, brightening her mood.

“Ahahahaha! Hahahaha!”

“That’s it, that’s it!”

“Take it off! Take it off!”

Roxy didn’t remember much after that. She knew she needed to avenge her fallen comrade, but she was suddenly dizzy, and unconsciousness was creeping up on her. The last thing she saw was Kishirika climbing up on the counter and dancing around naked.

The next morning, Roxy opened her eyes.

“Urgh...”

Her head was pounding, and her face puckered when she smelled the stench of alcohol on her own breath. She immediately used a spell specifically tailored for hangovers to remove the toxins from her body, then used a healing spell on her head. When she looked around, she realized she was in a pub. It looked as if there had been a brawl; the table was broken, and empty casks and shattered bottles lay strewn about.

"Urgh, I really did drink too much." Her memory was hazy, but she did remember drinking too much.

She glanced to the side to see a half-naked Talhand lying there with only the whites of his eyes showing. For a moment, Roxy thought he might be dead, but a dwarf could never drink himself to death. Besides, Talhand used to say that he'd once dreamed of drowning to death in alcohol, so even if he had, it would have been the death he'd aspired to.

Roxy cast her gaze about the room once again. There were heaps of bodies everywhere, all spread about and moaning. Among them was the man who'd solicited money for more drinks. Everyone here had clearly drunk themselves into oblivion and was now suffering in the throes of a hangover.

That's what you get for drinking so much when you can't even use healing magic, Roxy thought.

Among the sea of unconscious forms, only two people were standing—an angry barkeep and a disheartened Kishirika.

"Compensation, I'm asking for compensation. I can't sell nothin' with all the destruction you all caused."

"Yeah, uh, but..."

"What, you can't pay? Ain't you the one who said you'd be treatin' everyone?"

“I did say that, but I thought what I paid already would be enough...”

“So you don’t have any money, do ya?”

“No, uh, sorry, not a single crude iron.”

“Then I have no choice but to sell you in the slave market.”

“What? You would dare sell me...?! Wait, wait, I’ll contact Hagura, just hold on!”

“I’m not gonna hold. You’re just sayin’ that so you can run away.”

Roxy let out a sigh and dug into her pocket. She made a face when she produced her coin bag and saw the state of it. She’d donated a hefty portion of her funds when she was drunk last night.

No, the one who actually drank all of that was Talhand, she thought. Roxy turned to the unconscious Talhand and swiped his coin purse. She peered inside, found a decent amount within, and took to her feet. There was a sour smell coming from her shoulder, which she scrunched her face at as she approached the barkeep. “Here’s your money.”

“Hm?”

Roxy took out six whole emerald ore coins and tucked them into the barkeep’s hand.

“That ain’t quite enough.”

“We bought up all your booze before we started sending out for more. You have the earnings from that, don’t you?”

“Ah...well, I guess,” he said as he turned on his heel and headed back into the kitchen area.

Roxy let out another sigh as she tossed the coin purse onto Talhand’s belly.

"Ooh...ooooh...I'm sorry, I'm so sorry!" Kishirika was trembling as she looked up at Roxy.

Roxy looked down at her, remembering what she'd heard from her old village chief about the Demon World's Great Emperor. She was a bit different from what Roxy had pictured, but her peculiarities lined up. If she was from a demon tribe with a long lifespan, it made sense that her physical appearance didn't match her age. She seemed to be on good terms with the Demon King of the area, too.

"Excuse me, just to confirm—I'm not mistaken in assuming that you are *the* Great Emperor of the Demon World, Kishirika Kishirisu herself, am I?"

"Hm? Oh, that's right! No one seems to believe me lately, though! And your name is?"

"Pardon the late introduction," Roxy said. "I'm Roxy, of the Biegoya Region's Migurd tribe."

Kishirika gave an, "Oooh," when she heard Roxy's name. "Roxy? Ohh, I know you! You're Rudeus' master!"

"...You know Rudy?"

"I happened to run into him in Wind Port. That boy was quite entertaining!"

"Y-you don't say..." Roxy wondered suspiciously just what it was that Rudeus had said about her, but she was too scared to ask.

"Hm, Rudeus helped me in a pinch, and you've shown yourself to be a great teacher. You helped me as well, so let's see...why don't I give you a reward?"

Roxy's heart leaped when she heard the word *reward*. The Great Emperor of the Demon World was famous for bestowing demon eyes on people. It was precisely because of that power that she was called *Emperor* rather than *King*,

and it was that ability which had given her the military strength to launch the Great Human-Demon War.

Which gave Roxy an idea. “Um, Your Greatness, are you able to look for missing people with your demon eyes?”

“Yes, I can. There’s not a person in this world I can’t find,” Kishirika boasted.

“All right...then I’d like you to look for Rudeus and his family. They’re currently missing,” Roxy said without hesitation. It was a shame to forego receiving a demon eye from Kishirika, but she’d heard Kishirika’s Eye of All-Seeing could find anything and anyone, anywhere in the world.

“Oho, how admirable of you, to use your one and only wish for the sake of another! Were the world such that I was in the position to do so, I’d bestow upon you the position of Demon King!”

“No, I don’t need that.”

“Oh, I see, too humble for that. Well, then...” Kishirika’s eye rotated, changing color. She craned her neck this way and that, humming to herself as she nodded. “Rudeus is in the northern part of the Central Continent. He’s wearing light clothing and running. Training, perhaps.”

Roxy bobbed her head. It seemed that, just as the message left for him had requested, he was going to search the northern part of the Central Continent. He could’ve headed straight for Begaritt from Millishion, but he’d probably wanted to see the state of his home before he set off.

“His father is in Millishion, along with a maid. Hmm, the maid is apparently named Lilia...and they’re living in the same building, with their two daughters.”

“Oh,” Roxy let her breath out. She’d heard that Lilia and Aisha were still missing, but they’d apparently been

found and were safe. Perhaps Rudeus had found them on the Demon Continent and escorted them home.

"His mother is...hold on a moment." Kishirika hummed and screwed up her face, squinting her eye. "She's in Begaritt Continent, in the Maze City of Rapan...it seems."

Roxy's face lit up. It was far from here, but at least she'd confirmed that they were all alive. As you'd expect of the Greyrat family—their luck was strong.

"However...something is a bit odd." Kishirika's face scrunched and her eye slowly turned.

"Is there some kind of problem?"

"No...hmm, I can't quite see."

"You can't see? Even with your eye, Your Greatness?"

"I'm not quite at my full strength yet," Kishirika explained. "Well, you'll understand if you see for yourself."



"That's troubling. If something's wrong, I need to know the details." Roxy pressed her for an explanation. In her ventures thus far, she'd seen the tragedies that befell the refugees. It was disconcerting that even the Great Emperor of the Demon World was having trouble zeroing in on Zenith with her demon eyes.

"Well...complain if you like, but I can't see what I can't see. Ohh, that's right. This may come as a surprise, but she may be in the middle of that labyrinth. It's a labyrinth city, and I've never been there myself, so I can't say for sure."

"You can't see inside the labyrinth?" Roxy asked.

"No. Begaritt's labyrinth is overflowing with a high concentration of mana."

Roxy fell into thought. Zenith had once gone dungeon delving with Paul, Elinalise and Talhand. She understood their strength well after journeying alongside them. However, why hadn't she been in contact yet? Three years had passed since the Displacement Incident.

"At any rate, she is alive, yes?"

"Indeed, there's no doubt about that," Kishirika assured her.

Roxy decided to believe those words. Whatever the reason, they would have to delve into that labyrinth.

She lowered her head. "I understand, then. Thank you."

"Think nothing of it. It's a show of gratitude for the help you provided." Kishirika gave an exaggerated nod and, still a little unsteady on her feet, took her leave from the pub.

That afternoon, Talhand awoke and resumed his drinking as if nothing had happened, and Elinalise returned with hickies peppered across her neck. Roxy gathered the two of them for a meeting.

“It was good fortune to run into the Great Emperor of the Demon World.” When she heard about Kishirika, Elinalise just laughed quietly. Roxy didn’t think it was that significant an event, perhaps because they’d met while they were drunk at a pub. Or perhaps it was Kishirika’s lack of dignity.

“Leavin’ that aside, that means our journey’s over, right?” Talhand responded, seeming a bit reluctant to see the end of their quest.

It would take them a year to reach the Millis Continent from here, but it was true that their objective had been fulfilled. They’d confirmed that all of Paul’s family were alive, and even knew where the last two were located. It was over.

“What are you going to do, Roxy?”

“I’m going to return to Millishion and talk to Paul about what I found,” she said.

“Then we’ll part ways with you somewhere before then,” Elinalise replied.

It seemed Elinalise and Talhand didn’t want to meet Paul. The reason was apparently the huge fight they’d had when he left, but they wouldn’t tell her exactly what had happened. Roxy wasn’t particularly interested, either, so she hadn’t been all that persistent in asking.

“Hmm, but Rudeus is pretty far off and all by himself,” Talhand blurted out, pressing his hand to his chin.

That brought Roxy to a sudden realization. She would head to Millishion from here, and then, most likely, travel

alongside Paul to the Begaritt Continent. If she did that, then Rudeus would be left alone, unaware of the circumstances, searching the northern part of the Central Continent by himself.

“We need to find some way to let him know,” Elinalise said, concerned.

But how? The northern part of the Central Continent looked nearby on a map, but it was much further in reality. Roxy fell back into thought. Rudeus was exceptional, but he was still young. It was cruel to leave him to struggle in vain in such a vulnerable period of his life. Whether he reunited with his family or struck out on his own, she at least wanted to tell him that he didn’t need to search anymore.

“And that’s where I come in...du-du-du-dun!”

“And me! Dun-du-dun!”

Suddenly, two interlopers appeared out of nowhere.

“I listened in on your conversation!”

“By eavesdropping!”

The first to come bursting through the door was a well-built man. A single glance at him was enough to know he was a demon, for he had skin like obsidian and six arms. The ones on top were folded in over his chest, the ones in the middle were making finger guns at Roxy, and the bottom ones were resting on his waist. His hair, which flowed down to his waist, was purple. Perched on his shoulder, reclining at leisure, was the Demon World’s Great Emperor.

“Here we go! I’m Kishirika Kishirika! People call me... the Great! Emperor! Of! The! Demon! World!”

“And I’m her fiancé, the Demon King Badigadi!”

The other three stared, dumbfounded. The first to react was Elinalise. “Um, I think we last saw each other this

morning, sir.”

“Ahahaha, I had an amazing night with you, miss!” Badi clenched one fist and inserted his thumb between his index and middle finger as he responded.

Roxy felt a sudden cold sweat as she asked, “D-do you two know each other?”

“Um, basically, I guess we do...?”

Apparently, Elinalise had left the pub Roxy was in and gone with a man to a different one last night. There, the man had plied Elinalise with alcohol, and she had happily returned the favor. Next thing she knew, she was waking up in the pitch-black arms of the man before them. After which, the two of them went at it again all afternoon.

“Huh? But just now, you said fiancé...what? Ah, I suppose we should introduce ourselves first?” Flustered, Roxy’s eyes darted back and forth, but she finally settled on bowing her head.

“Hm, Roxy, raise your head. Since Badi is so popular, this is a near-daily occurrence.”

“Hm, more like it’s physically impossible for me to put it in Kishirika yet, so I have no other choice.”

The words were spoken in such a carefree manner that Roxy’s brain struggled to digest their meaning. Courtesy of Elinalise, she had gained a smattering of knowledge on such matters, but the adulterous relations between her companion and a man who called himself a Demon King and the fiancé of the Great Emperor of the Demon World went beyond her realm of understanding.

“However! Leaving all of that aside!”

“Indeed; it’s just a passing fling anyway!”

Roxy knew of the Demon King Badigadi, or the Immortal Demon King Badigadi, as he was known. He was

the Demon King who ruled over the Biegoya Region, younger brother of the Immortal Demon King Atofe. Atofe was aligned with the moderates during the war and fought against the Demon God Laplace at Kishirika's Castle, where she was defeated. Her current whereabouts were unknown, but she was a venerated figure.

"Roxy, I owe a debt to Rudeus. If he has lost his way, then I will lend him my strength!"

"Although she'll be borrowing my strength to do it!"

Before Roxy, as confused as she was, could respond, Talhand recovered. He stroked his thick beard, directing a quizzical look toward Kishirika. "Yer sure about this?"

"Ooh, you're the dwarf from yesterday! Yes, I'm sure, right, Badi?" Kishirika smacked him on the head and the Demon King nodded.

"Yeah, I'm curious about this brat named Rudeus whom Kishirika keeps praising every chance she gets! I want to see with my own eyes just how great he really is!"

"What's this? Are you jealous, darling?" Kishirika cooed.

"Why of course I am, honey," Badi replied in turn.

"Tsk, you're still such a child. I love you and only you."

"Heh, I'm not going to let that make me complacent. I'll crush any rivals who appear."

And you crushing Rudeus would be bad, Roxy thought to herself, but she had a feeling they wouldn't listen to her.

"Heh heh heh."

"Hahaha."

"Ahahahaha! Hahahah! Haha-urk!"

"Ahahahaha! Ahahaha! Ha... you okay?"

The conversation proceeded apace before Roxy could even begin to make sense of it.

It was common knowledge in this world that the seas were ruled by the seafolk, who in turn controlled the ability of those living on land to cross them. This setup was a result of discord that broke out in the process of Laplace's War coming to an end, but we'll leave that aside for now.

The Demon King Bagura Hagura and the King of the Seafolk were close personal friends, and the King of the Seafolk allowed his friend passage in secret. Meanwhile, Demon King Badigadi and the Demon King Bagura Hagura were also old acquaintances. By making use of that connection, their group could bypass the route that would take them through the Divine Continent, and head straight for the Central Continent instead.

However, if Roxy went with them, the report to Millishion would be delayed. Someone had to go to Millishion to update Paul, and Roxy couldn't do it alone. The Demon Continent was too dangerous, even for an exceptional magician like her. Her judgment was sharp and her spell incantation quick, but she still had to sleep at night.

"I absolutely refuse. I don't want to see Paul's face," said Elinalise.

"Yeah, me either," Talhand chimed in.

"Very well, then. I will be the one to go." Since the two of them were being selfish, Roxy would first head to Millishion. Personally, she would have preferred to see Rudeus, but she had no other choice.

She just needed one more to go with her. The two exchanged glances, and soon enough, Talhand folded. “Guess it’ll be me. To tell the truth, not lookin’ forward to bein’ on one of those ships again.”

“My sympathies,” Elinalise said.

Talhand’s shoulders drooped. Roxy didn’t see why the two of them couldn’t just head to Millishion and inform Paul via letter, but they apparently had their reasons, so she didn’t think too deeply about it.

And so, Roxy’s party split into two. Roxy and Talhand would retrace their path back to Millishion. Elinalise would travel with the Great Emperor of the Demon World Kishirika Kishirisu and the Demon King Badigadi to the northern part of the Central Continent. There was quite a bit of time before the latter’s ship set off, so Roxy decided to depart ahead of them.

“Miss Elinalise, thank you for everything.”

“Same to you, Roxy.” The two exchanged a firm handshake. “If you find a good man, you better not let him go. You have to use your upper and lower lips to get a tight grip on him.”

“You’re bringing that up again?”

“None of that, just listen to me. If there’s someone you really like, go hard for them. Love is something that can grow afterward.”

Talhand breathed a sigh at Elinalise’s words. “You said the same thing to Zenith, didn’t ya?”

“I did. That’s how she got Paul. My teaching is flawless.”

So that’s it, Roxy thought as she listened in. Paul and Zenith seemed like the ideal husband and wife to her. If it

was Elinalise's advice that brought them together, then it was advice worth listening to.

"Very well, Miss Elinalise. If I find such a person, I will 'go hard for them.'"

"Of course. I'll be sure to tell Rudeus how miserable you were at night, rustling in your bedsheets as you went at it alone."

"Wait—why do you know about that? And please don't say that. I wasn't thinking about Rudy when I did it."

"Of course, of course."

Roxy had a realization just then. If Elinalise began her search now, she'd probably find Rudeus within about a year. Rudeus would be thirteen or fourteen by now. At that age, it wasn't unusual to think Elinalise might be interested in him. That kind of bothered her.

"You went quiet all of a sudden. What's wrong?"

"No, it's just... If Rudy has become a fine man, will you go for him?"

Roxy tried to sound as casual as she could when asking, and when she did, Elinalise breathed out a disgusted, "Ha! I don't have the faintest desire to become Paul's daughter-in-law." She looked genuinely disgusted.

Feeling reassured, Roxy just said, "Oh, all right." Then, "Well, we'd best be on our way."

"Farewell, Roxy. Have a safe trip."

"Yes, you too, Miss Elinalise."

Elinalise took a glance at Talhand. She loomed over the short, stubby dwarf, glaring down at him as if he were some kind of insect. "Talhand, please go off and die in a ditch somewhere."

Talhand looked equally displeased at seeing her and hocked some spit onto the ground. “I’m returnin’ those words right back to ya.”

Watching this, Roxy was reminded once again that the two of them were, somehow, close.

Later, Elinalise boarded her own ship. It was a seafolk vessel, back in ancient times. It was pulled along by sea creatures, making the human-made ships look shabby in comparison, but human ships were actually faster and safer.

Elinalise walked up the ramp alongside Badigadi. From behind them came Kishirika’s echoing laughter.

“Hahahaha! Well then, let’s see each other again, Badi! When you want to see me again, return to the Demon Continent!”

“Indeed, and stay in good health as well, my betrothed! We’ll eventually meet again! Ahahaha!”

“Who knows how many years it will be until the next time, though! Bwaahaha!”

The Great Emperor of the Demon World, Kishirika Kishirisu, did not board the ship. When Elinalise saw that, she cocked her head. “Hm? She’s not going to come along with us?”

“Mm. Kishirika can’t leave the Demon Continent.”

“Oh, a curse?”

“Something like that.”

If that was how things were, Elinalise would have preferred Kishirika accompany Roxy and Talhand. Their safety would be assured with the Great Emperor of the Demon World around. Then again—she thought about what

it would be like for Roxy to have someone like Kishirika following her around, and changed her mind.

Meanwhile, Roxy Migurdia's journey continued.

Extra Chapter: Distorted, But Unchanged

There were vast expanses of water-filled paddies in the Sanakia Kingdom. A carriage rolled slowly along a path separating said paddies, protected by a number of knights. The knights walked along with relaxed looks on their faces, and the carriage didn't look expensive, so it was safe to assume no one important was riding inside.

And, in fact, the only people in the carriage were three women. One was a knight of the Shirone Kingdom named Ginger York. She sat near the door, listening to the conversation of the other two.

"Big Brother Kennel Master really was dreamy." The one speaking so enthusiastically was the young girl in baggy maid's clothing, Aisha. "If I'm ever going to get married, it definitely has to be to someone like that. Right, Mother?"

"Y-yes, of course." Sitting opposite was a woman identical to Aisha, but older and wearing glasses. Her name was Lilia. Anyone who looked past the frames would see the cool glint in her eyes, giving off a distant and frosty impression. And yet, her gaze was currently shifting around.

"He was totally amazing when he saved me, you know? He pointed his finger at the ground like this, and swished, then a hole opened up, and then after that we went whooshing through the air! I wonder if that was magic too? It's amazing he can cast all that without chanting anything. Almost like the magic in fairytales."

"Yes, indeed. It's incredible...being able to cast like that without incantations."

Aisha had been singing the praises of “Big Brother” Kennel Master for a while now. Lilia was a bit perplexed. She’d been sure at first that Aisha had realized the Kennel Master was actually her older brother, Rudeus, but it was starting to look like she was just using “big brother” as a term of endearment for an older male figure.

“Besides, that was a first for me. I was so scared I wet myself, and yet, I wasn’t embarrassed because he was the one with me. I didn’t mind that he helped me get changed... Could this maybe...be love?” Aisha put her hands together as if in prayer, her eyes alight.

Seeing her daughter like that, Lilia hesitated. Should she tell her that the Kennel Master was actually Rudeus? Just the other day, Aisha had hated him. Granted, Lilia’s approach hadn’t been the best. She’d always gone on about how amazing and wonderful Rudeus was, wanting Aisha to serve him someday, but Aisha was exceptionally smart herself, and she’d seen right through her mother’s exaggerated claims that her brother was perfect beyond reproach. She’d sniffed out the flaws Lilia was covering up, and honed in on them.

People tended to assign great importance to the things they discovered for themselves, rather than what they heard from other people. A few years from now, Aisha would realize that what she’d been told was just as credible as the information she discovered for herself, but she was still too young for that. She thought that her mother was full of lies and that Rudeus was actually a good-for-nothing human being.

Lilia acknowledged she was partly to blame for that. She could have found better ways to tell Aisha about Rudeus, ones that didn’t include going on and on about him as if he were an object of worship. But didn’t matter if she admitted her mistakes now; Aisha had made up her mind

about Rudeus. At some point in their stay in the Shirone Kingdom, Lilia had given up on changing her daughter's mind. However, by some twist of fate, Aisha was now lavishing praise on her brother the Kennel Master.

Lilia paused to think. If she were to reveal that Aisha's beloved Kennel Master was actually Rudeus, wouldn't Aisha's hatred of her brother disappear? Wouldn't she be willing to serve him, just as Lilia wished?

Then again, Aisha hated lies and deceit, and Rudeus had hidden his true identity from her the entire time. Lilia had no idea why he'd done it, but Aisha was a clever girl who saw right through adults' attempts to gloss things over. Revealing that the Kennel Master was really Rudeus this late in the game might only make her hate him more. "See, he is underhanded!" she might say, or "I knew it, my brother is a pervert!" or "He wanted to wash my panties so bad that he lied to me!" Lilia would rather avoid that.

"Heey, Motherrrr. If my brother is actually dead, I'd like to serve the Kennel Master instead~"

"..."

Normally, at this point, Lilia would smack Aisha on the head and chide her not to say such ominous things. This time, she could do nothing but offer her a bitter smile as a cold sweat beaded on her face.

Should she tell Aisha that the Kennel Master was Rudeus or not? If she played her cards right, Aisha would come to love her brother. But if she failed, Aisha would hate him even more. The latter was unacceptable, but Lilia wasn't confident she could persuade her far-too-clever daughter. What should she do?

Unable to come up with an answer, she was forced to listen to Aisha's rambling.

"I'd do my best if I were to serve the Kennel Master. But then one day, when my guard's down and I'm getting changed and all defenseless, he'll come in and push me down, all hot and bothered, and make me his mistress. That will mark the beginning of a daily routine of obscene lovemaking. To me, it'll just be a physical relationship at first, but then one day he'll propose to me, saying 'I want your heart as well,' and...hee hee!"

"..."

Unbeknownst to Lilia, who was agonizing over her decision, Aisha was laughing to herself. She'd already seen right through everything—she knew the Kennel Master was really her brother, and while he wasn't perfect, he was as exceptional as her mother had said. She was just using this opportunity to torment Lilia.

In all honesty, Aisha didn't have the best relationship with her mother. Lilia had always been overcontrolling, ordering her to do this or that ever since she was little, refusing to give her an explanation even if she asked for one. And, apparently, the strict training her mother put her through was all so that she could someday serve her older brother. It was no wonder Aisha had grown sick of it... until she saw her brother in person. She witnessed his ability to react intelligently to his environment by using voiceless magic to aid in their escape, as well as his courage in charging into the Shirone Royal Palace to rescue her mother, and his kindness after being peed on and helping her wash up and get changed with no sign of disgust. All of that was enough to make Aisha giddy, as she realized, "So this is what people mean when they say 'dreamy'!"

Her brother was exceptional, and if she wanted to keep up with him, she had to be exceptional, too. Once she understood that, she was actually grateful for everything her mother had made her do. Without all that training, she

might balk at the idea of serving such an extraordinary older brother.

"Ah-ah, I wonder if my brother really is dead. Then I can go straight into the arms of the Kennel Master."

"A-as long as Lord Rudeus hasn't passed, you're going to serve him, you understand?"

"Of course, I know that." This was the first time Aisha had ever seen her mother so flustered. "But just for a year, okay? After that I want to spend the rest of my time with the Kennel Master~"

"N-no, that's unacceptable—hmm..."

Aisha continued to enjoy teasing Lilia for a while after that.

The woman known as Lilia was born in a remote village in the Asura Kingdom. Later, she was the only girl in a Water God Style swordplay training hall in a mid-sized city in the Donati region. She had no surname. Commoners in the Asura Kingdom were not given surnames. Lilia was born as just Lilia, and as it was her father who owned the hall, she picked up a blade at a young age and learned rapidly.

Like her parents, Lilia was terrible with words. She conducted herself coolly and quietly, and didn't have much charm to her. However, she was a hard worker, so those around her all loved her. Even though it was clear she had no talent for the sword, she was still endearing to the other students who saw how eagerly she practiced. The students doted on her as if she were their little sister, and she gained a bunch of older brothers in turn. Her life was the peaceful vista you'd expect from a small, rural sword training hall.

The students' gazes began to change when Lilia was about thirteen. As her body welcomed the changes that accompanied puberty, the other students stopped showering with her and avoided speaking with her one-on-one. They didn't specifically avoid her or try to exclude her, but Lilia could vaguely sense their hot gazes on her.

Lilia was a very realistic girl. She had no brothers, and her mother's physical condition had worsened after her birth. With no son to be heir to the sword training hall, her mother was left feeling apologetic while her father wracked his brain over what to do. That was why Lilia assumed she'd eventually marry one of the students, who would then inherit the hall in her stead. The students were all like brothers to her, which was why none of them particularly stood out as candidates for marriage, but she could tell how they kept each other in check when she was around.

It became a hot topic of discussion in the hall as to who the master, her father, would select both as her partner in marriage and the next master of the hall. Behind the scenes, those interested in becoming the master or simply interested in marrying Lilia began to compete with one another. Time wore on without anything being decided, but Lilia was sure that the future she envisioned would eventually come to pass.

It was around then that Paul tumbled into their midst. Even though he had no money or a place to live, Lilia's father readily welcomed him. With his bright and energetic personality, Paul became popular with everyone in a flash. He was also blessed with a talent for swordsmanship, and quickly absorbed their techniques, likely thanks in part to what he'd already learned with the Sword God Style. It had taken Lilia ten years to accomplish as much and he'd caught

up to her, then surpassed her. In no time at all, he'd grown so skilled that even her father couldn't compete with him.

Paul was talented with the sword and popular with the other students. Because of that, it was soon decided that he would be Lilia's life partner. Although Lilia was bewildered by the suddenness, the speed at which things had proceeded set her heart aflutter. Paul was unlike all the other people she'd seen before. He was so free-spirited; he possessed neither rigid thinking where swordplay was concerned, nor firm beliefs on lineage and inheritance. His carefree lifestyle seemed dazzling to Lilia.

But Paul was a bit *too* different from the other denizens of the training hall, and it wasn't just his lax views on swordplay, household duties, or lineage, but also his approach to women. Although the other students had readily welcomed Paul at first, discord began to develop between them. They didn't look too kindly upon someone who'd appeared out of nowhere and stolen the seat of hall master out from beneath them, but they were willing to begrudgingly accept it because it was Paul. However, if he was going to treat as worthless something that they considered precious, something they'd fought so hard to try to obtain, then that changed things.

They decided to try getting rid of Paul. During practice matches, they would focus their attacks on him, come at him from behind with flying kicks, and purposefully spill water on his training outfit. Lilia took Paul's side and reprimanded them. The students didn't look too kindly upon that, either, and their behavior escalated.

If Paul were a *normal* boy, it would have ended there. He would have acquiesced and made way for the others, or he would've fled from the hall after being chased out. However, Paul was a bad boy. With his mood soured, he resorted to acting out.

One night, he snuck into Lilia's sleeping chambers and stole her innocence. Lilia tried to struggle of course, but there was nothing she could do. Once everything was over, she was left in a daze. She couldn't process what it was that had happened to her. She never dreamed that Paul, whom she'd spoken so cheerfully with a few days prior, would do something like that. By the time her mother came into the room to see why her daughter hadn't gotten up yet and screamed at what she saw, Paul had already left town.

Lilia developed a distrust for men after that. She felt fear at the gazes of the other students and blatantly avoided bodily contact. That didn't change, not even after she turned fifteen and became an adult. Lilia's father was honor-bound to see to the survival of the sword hall, which had been in the family for generations. He had no son, and Lilia's birth had ruined her mother's body. He would have to marry her to one of his students to see his legacy continue. Still, a father was a father. As a parent, he couldn't force his daughter to be with a man after the deep mental scars she'd sustained.

Instead, he used his personal connections to recommend her to the Asura Royal Family as a maid and lady-in-waiting whose duties extended to taking up arms to protect the royal family when necessary. Lilia gradually overcame her distrust of men during her time serving as a guardswoman, but then sustained an injury while protecting the princess. Discharged from service, she headed for the Fittoa Region instead of returning home, where, by some twist of fate, she found a job as a maid to Paul's new family. She and Paul rekindled their affair, she got pregnant with his child, and then she became his second wife.

In all honesty, Lilia didn't know at the time if she was happy or not. She was basically a mistress, and Paul probably loved Zenith more than he did her. Zenith was a

dear friend to her, but Lilia had complex feelings of guilt and remorse. The Greyrats had accepted her as part of the family, but her anxiety and insecurity persisted.

Rudeus, who supported her in this time of mental turmoil, had been the one who talked Zenith into letting Lilia stay. Raising her daughter to someday serve him was the one thing Lilia could be certain she wanted, though she found herself questioning what this said about how much she loved Aisha. Her own father had cared more for her happiness than the continuation of his sword hall, which was why he'd helped her find another path in life. Was Lilia not trampling over the feelings of Aisha—her own daughter—if she used her to repay her debt to Rudeus and buy herself some peace of mind? Those worries only worsened as she realized that her daughter was not an ordinary child, but exceptionally intelligent.

The turning point came with the mysterious Displacement Incident, in which Lilia and Aisha were teleported to the Shirone Kingdom together. One moment they'd lost consciousness, and the next, they were in an expensive-looking room. Soon enough, they were completely surrounded by guards.

Faced with hostile, murderous men in armor, Lilia's mind went blank. Unable to comprehend what was happening, the one thought that came to her mind was *I have to protect my daughter*. Lilia grabbed the nearest candle stand, pushed her daughter behind her, and fought. However, after her long absence from actual battle, her body didn't move as she willed it, and the old wound in her leg only further hampered her mobility. Unable to offer much resistance, they were captured and Aisha was dragged along by the soldiers behind her mother.

"Please! Just spare the girl! Please just help my daughter! I don't care what happens to me! Just my daughter!" Lilia wept and screamed pitifully, but those words came unbidden and unconsciously. They were her true feelings.

Her *true* feelings.

After that, Lilia was confined to the castle, kept from making any contact with the outside world, and forced to work as a maid. However, her heart was lighter than before. The words that had spilled from her in a moment of desperation were pleas to save Aisha. She no longer doubted her love for her daughter, and was satisfied that her desire to have her serve Rudeus was not a purely selfish one.

Aisha was free-spirited and independent, perhaps because she took after Paul. She hated being restrained and found her mother suffocating. She couldn't comprehend why she should serve Rudeus, and being so clever, Aisha detested working hard toward a goal that she couldn't understand the meaning of.

Still, Lilia didn't give up. She taught her recalcitrant daughter all the knowledge she'd collected over the years. One day, Aisha would understand. As long as Rudeus remained the same person he had been on that day when he protected Lilia, Aisha would understand. Or so she thought...

"Ahh, Big Brother Kennel Master... Aah, he's all I can think about. Those sturdy arms that lifted me up, his gallant

face, and confused attitude..."

Aisha did understand. She'd seen Rudeus for herself and understood the meaning behind what Lilia had been doing—but this was also wrong. This wasn't the way she'd envisioned her daughter coming to understand Rudeus's greatness.

"Aisha." Lilia gradually stood up in the middle of the swaying carriage.

Aisha, who'd had a mischievous smile on her face, trembled with surprise at her mother's movement. Lilia had a habit of smacking Aisha on the head when she said or did something bad. Granted, Aisha was clever. She could estimate, to a certain degree, what would get her hit and what wouldn't, and she was mischievous enough to bait Lilia into hitting her, then stick her tongue out and resolve it with a "Sowwy."

But this time she didn't know why her mother was angry. She was complimenting Rudeus—complimenting the older brother her mother told her to serve. Had she messed up somehow? Or was the Kennel Master not her brother after all? Those worries flashed through her mind as her mother's hand approached her.

"Huh...?"

Aisha froze as she felt something soft brush the top of her head. Lilia was patting her. Times like these, when her mother stroked her hair, were far and few between.

"Mother?"

For some reason, Lilia felt timid when her daughter addressed her. Her hand, which had been stroking Aisha's head, now moved to the little girl's back, drawing her small body close. "Aisha. Mister Kennel Master or Master Rudeus... whoever you choose is fine with me."

Rudeus had refused to take Aisha with him, but Lilia was certain that, a few years from now, the day would come when they were reunited again.

"And when that day comes, give everything you have to serve him." As Lilia said those words, she swore to herself that she would raise Aisha to be a wonderful woman, and that it wouldn't be for Rudeus' sake. Or for her own. Lilia was aware that her own egotistical feelings were still mixed into that sentiment, but she truly, from the bottom of her heart, wanted Aisha to grow into a remarkable woman.

"Ahaha... I guess you caught me after all...huh?" Aisha felt uneasy about the soft sensation on her head, and her lips curled upward. "I-I knew, of course! That the Kennel Master is my brother... so I just kind of wanted to try teasing you, just a little..."

As she stammered her incoherent excuse, it suddenly occurred to Aisha that she might never have been embraced like this by her mother before. As soon as she thought that, an incredible wave of happiness swept over her. It was the first time the young girl had ever experienced crying with joy. Confused by the tears that refused to stop, she just wrapped her arms around her mother and soaked her shoulder.

Ginger, who had been watching the two, averted her eyes. Her gaze turned to the water paddies as they rippled in the wind, extending for as far as the eye could see.

About the Author: Rifujin na Magonote

Resides in Gifu Prefecture. Loves fighting games and cream puffs. Inspired by other published works on the website *Let's Become Novelists*, they created the web novel *Mushoku Tensei*. They instantly gained the support of readers, and became number one on the site's combined popularity rankings within the first year of publishing.

“People need to set goals for themselves in order to be optimistic,” the author expressed with a grin.



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